Boon

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by SleepsWithCoyotes

Summary

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"Unless, of course, you lie on your application or tamper with the genetic screening your employment is conditional upon," Will counters, upper lip curling in disdain. He's not devout, content to be ignored by Others and gods alike, and though he acknowledges the usefulness of the Compact, he considers the monthly tithe too high a price for the boons they receive in return. He's still going to argue this point with anyone who'll listen, because as little as he likes Others, he appreciates hypocrisy even less.

Notes

Moving all of my WIPs from tumblr, because inevitably I fall asleep before I can finish the last three lines of a post, and then I've got a fight on my hands. XD (I'll still be posting things there, but yeah, it's fic dump time.) Also since I can't currently play any of the games I want to be playing, expect a revolving update of anywhere between five to seven fics, because my brain *can not* be left to its own devices. Like, ever. For any reason. So...shorter chapters than my usual, but a lot more of them, probably. Sorry in advance! XD

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

"Everyone has thought about killing someone," Will tells his class, "one way or another. Be it your own hand or the hands of the gods."

As if they think he can read their guilt, for once his students find somewhere else to look: at the projector screen at his back where Mrs. Marlow lies still and staring in death, as in the final moments of her life; at their notes; at the podium where Will rests his elbow. He's been trying to ground himself, resist his restless need to pace. Having so many eyes follow his every move makes him feel like prey, even though he's reasonably certain most of his class is human. There's only one he's not certain of--can't be certain of unless he meets her eyes--but he makes a point of treating all his students the same. The gods know they need more Others interested in investigating corpses, not just making them.

"Now, think about killing Mrs. Marlow. Why did she deserve this? Tell me your design," he instructs, dropping the projector's remote onto the podium. "Tell me who you are."

His class is well-trained. The dropping of the clicker invokes a near-Pavlovian response, his students gathering books and papers without needing a formal dismissal. No one tries to hang back and ask him questions, which just makes the dark figure easing along the wall in the corner of his eye that much more noticeable. Human-shaped, though that doesn't mean a thing. Others are good at camouflage. Risking a fast glance, he tightens his jaw and starts shoving his belongings into his bag, slipping his unneeded glasses on as an extra layer of defense. His visitor is definitely human and definitely unwelcome.

"Mr. Graham," Jack Crawford greets him, shoving his hands in his pockets. In someone else, it might have passed for respect of Will's personal space, but paired with Jack's proprietary smile, the gesture oozes self-satisfaction. "Special Agent Jack Crawford," he says, closing the gap between them to offer a handshake. "I head the Behavioral Sciences Unit."

"We've met," Will reminds him, shaking the offered hand reluctantly. Crawford is a big man, a loud man in Will's experience, but his grip is purely professional.

"Yes. We had a disagreement when we opened up the museum."

"I disagreed with what you named it," Will counters. He has no problem with the museum itself, just the theater surrounding it.

Jack's shoulders stiffen as he braces himself for another round. "The Evil Minds Research Museum."

"It's a little hammy, Jack," Will grumbles for what feels like the fiftieth time. "'Evil' creates expectations. Expectations breed complacency. People visit hoping to see the acts of rogue Others put on display; when they see human crimes, they dismiss them."

"Everybody wants to see the show," Jack sighs. Will's always gotten the impression that Jack halfway agrees with him, just isn't repentant in the slightest. The name brings in visitors;

happy visitors are good for the Bureau's PR. What Others think of the name is hard to say.

Jack glances up at the screen behind Will, and though he curses himself for giving the man one more reason to stay and talk, it's too late to wish he'd shut the projector down. Jack picks up the remote without asking and clicks to the next slide. "I see you've hitched your host to a teaching post," Jack says, making it all too clear he considers it a waste of a good horse. "I also understand you find it difficult to be social."

He leans in and down as he says it, eyes boring so fiercely into Will it sends cold fingers of panic crawling up his spine. Just looking down at his hands is no longer enough; he has to turn his face away, eyes skittering around the room, searching for exits.

"Well, I'm just talking at them," he says, sensing a trap. "I'm not listening to them. It's...it's not social."

"I see." Jack's smiling again, too knowing. "May I?"

Will stares in disbelief as Jack reaches for his face without waiting for permission, not that Will would have given it. Since when does 'does not play well with others' translate to 'yes, please violate my personal bubble?' He wants to step back but forces himself to hold his ground as Jack gently pushes his glasses up to settle properly on the bridge of his nose, returning Jack's stare flatly. Jack wants eye contact? Fine.

Will braces himself, lets the focus of his stare go lax and--

Jack drops his eyes immediately, shoulders stiffening as he tries to pretend he isn't affected, but Will's seen the instinctive shudder too many times not to recognize it now. Humans can always tell when he's reading them, and that's fine by him, because he can't read a living person without meeting their eyes--something he tries hard not to do. It's not like reading the living is a choice. Crime scenes are much more forgiving.

"Where do you fall on the spectrum?" Jack asks without skipping a beat, though he keeps his eyes down until Will looks pointedly away. It's an invasive question, but Will snorts.

"My horse is hitched to a post closer to Asperger's and autistics than narcissists and sociopaths, but that's not what you want to know. You want to know how I faked my genetic profile."

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"Unless, of course, you lie on your application or tamper with the genetic screening your employment is conditional upon," Will counters, upper lip curling in disdain. He's not devout, content to be ignored by Others and gods alike, and though he acknowledges the usefulness of the Compact, he considers the monthly tithe too high a price for the boons they receive in return. He's still going to argue this point with anyone who'll listen, because as little as he likes Others, he appreciates hypocrisy even less.

"Anyway," he rushes on before Jack can pick up the argument, "the answer is no. I didn't fake anything. I'm one hundred percent human."

"But this talent you have--"

"I don't know," Will says forcefully, tossing his satchel onto the podium to shove the rest of his things inside. He's gone over this so many times, and it never gets more enjoyable. "I don't know, Jack. Maybe my mother received a boon and it turned out to be hereditary. Dad never talked about her, and I don't remember her. Whatever it is I do, it doesn't register on any test, counter or scope. For all anyone knows, it's nothing but an active imagination. Now if you'll excuse me--"

Jack reaches out before Will can escape and flattens his hand on Will's satchel. "Can I borrow your imagination?"

Will takes in a deep breath and lets it out slow. It's not like he doesn't know Jack's game: get him off-balance, keep him there, and then see how much he'll concede just to be left alone. Usually people aren't so heavy-handed about it, and Jack's the head of the Behavioral Sciences Unit. He must know he's pushing too hard, so there must be a reason for it.

"Why?" Will asks bluntly, forcing himself to look Jack full in the face again.

This time Jack doesn't shy away. "Walk with me," he suggests instead of immediately answering, but Will sees flashes of it all the same: frustration, worry, empty hands closing on missing evidence. He hasn't asked a boon, probably because if any of the Others currently working for the Bureau could grant it, they'd have done it already, and the thought of entering a plea for justice into the general slush pile of human hopes and dreams to be picked over by the bored and powerful offends his pride. Awareness of the cost is in there too, but Jack's a pragmatist. Others have to eat. Better they give something back than just take indiscriminately. It's not like there's any getting rid of them.

Against his better judgment, Will nods.

Jack's silent until they leave the building, the halls full of too many curious ears to be discussing an open case. Once they're out in the open, Jack's a lot more forthcoming.

"I don't know if you follow the news--"

"It's sort of in my job description." It's really not; he knows other teachers who avoid it, claiming they see enough ugliness in the classroom without adding to it.

"Then you've probably heard some of this already. So far we've got eight girls abducted from eight different Minnesota campuses, all in the last eight months."

Will frowns. "You're sure it's not a tithe?"

"If it was, why hide it? Easier to just register the claim, state the boon, and be done with it."

"Someone doubling up? Taking more than the Compact allows?" His first thought is the Chesapeake Ripper, but the Ripper kills have continued like clockwork: three a month, no more and no less. Tidy and clean, with no more mystery than a butcher's shop. Something about the numbers nags at him. "I thought there were seven."

"There were," Jack says grimly as they start up the stairs to the building that houses his office.

"When did you tag the eighth?" Will asks, stomach sinking even before he hears the answer.

"About three minutes before I walked into your lecture hall."

Jack's sudden desperation, seeking out Will, makes a gruesome kind of sense. Seven might've been a ritual, a plan--something with a finite number and an end. Eight is pathological. Certain now that the killer won't stop--

But do they know it's a killer?

"You're calling them abductions because you don't have any bodies?"

"No bodies, no parts of bodies, nothing that comes out of bodies," Jack grumbles, surprising Will. Definitely not the Ripper, then. The expertly-butchered carcasses he leaves behind makes his victims' fates abundantly clear. "Nothing."

"Then those girls weren't taken from where you think they were taken."

"Then where were they taken from?"

"I don't know." He reads people, scenes; he's not clairvoyant. "Someplace else."

Jack doesn't like that, frowning as he chews over this new angle, disordering whatever pieces of the puzzle he thought he'd managed to connect before.

"So tell me about the girls," Will suggests as they near Jack's office. "Any commonalities?"

"Easier if I show you," Jack says gruffly. "All of them were abducted on a Friday so they wouldn't have to be reported missing until Monday. However he's covering his tracks, he needs a weekend to do it."

Will nods slowly as Jack gestures for him to precede the man into his office. It's definitely sounding more and more like a human killer with human limitations.

There's a big map of Minnesota pinned up on Jack's wall, each kill site marked with a post-it and a bit of white string that leads to glossy, numbered photographs. There's only seven up on the board, but Jack hands him a photo with a tired sigh.

"Number eight?"

"Elise Nichols. St. Cloud State on the Mississippi. Disappeared on Friday. Was supposed to house sit for her parents over the weekend, feed the cat. She never made it home."

He sees why Jack wanted to show him. The girls' similarities leap out at him: young, dark-haired, pretty in a girl next door way, neither the life of the party nor the wallflower. Taking his glasses off, Will folds them up and slips them into his pocket. They don't prevent him from *seeing*--only not looking will do that--but it's the principle of the thing.

"Yeah, one through seven are dead, don't you think?" Will asks, glancing up at the board and back to the photograph in his hand. "He's not keeping them around. He got himself a new one."

Jack takes a fortifying breath. "So we focus on Elise Nichols."

"They're all very Mall of America," Will says as he adds Elise's photo to the board. "That's a lot of wind-chafed skin."

"Same hair color, same eye color," Jack agrees. "Roughly the same age. Same height, same weight. So, what is it about all these girls?"

Will shakes his head. "It's not about all of these girls. It's just about one of them. He's like Willy Wonka. Every girl he takes is a candy bar, and hidden in amongst all those candy bars is the one true intended victim, which, if we follow through on our metaphor, is your golden ticket."

It's not the best comparison he could have made. These girls may be sweet, but if the killer is human, it's unlikely they've become food. Small mercies, he supposes.

Jack frowns. "So is he warming up for his golden ticket or just...reliving whatever it is he did to her?"

"No, the golden ticket wouldn't be the first taken, and she wouldn't be the last. He would hide how special she was. I mean, I would," Will says with a helpless shrug. "Wouldn't you?"

He's halfway to the door before Jack says, "I want you to get closer to this." He sounds far too impressed for Will's liking; maybe he should've sounded more uncertain.

"No. You have Heimlich at Harvard and Bloom at Georgetown," he insists, sweeping a hand out to wave Jack's arguments aside. "They do the same thing I do."

"That's not exactly true, is it? You have a very specific way of thinking about things."

Will laughs in disbelief. "Has there been a lot of discussion about the specific way I think?" There's been a lot of talk about the way he *sees*, but somehow his mind rarely comes into it, like he's nothing but a vehicle for his so-called gift.

Jack purses his lips briefly, seeing he's hit a nerve. "You make jumps you can't explain, Will--
"

"No, no--the *evidence* explains."

"Then help me find some evidence."

It's not the grudging plea in Jack's voice that makes him hesitate. He knows the right thing to do, and he's not unaffected by the bright, hopeful eyes staring back at him from glossy eight-by-tens. He wants to help, even though instinct's telling him it's a bad idea to let Jack Crawford think he's won, even a single battle.

"That may require me to be sociable," he mutters.

It's going to require him to *look*, and that means staring into a deep, dark well with nothing but monsters swimming at the bottom.

Chapter 2

When Will asks the Nichols about their cat, he's pretty sure Jack's going to take him aside and deliver up a lecture on sensitivity. That tells him pretty conclusively that Jack's never been a pet owner. If his dogs had gone two days without food, the way they met him at the door would have stood out, his first sign that something had gone very wrong with their sitter.

When he walks into Elise's room and sees her lying on the bed, for a split second he thinks his gift has gotten ahead of itself. He expects her, yes, but only after he's had time to center his thoughts, brace himself for what inevitably follows when he relaxes his control. It's not until her father breathes, "*Elise*," eyes shining with relief, that Will realizes he's not the only one seeing this.

He catches Mr. Nichols before he can take a second step toward the bed. Whatever this is, it's no happy ending.

One hour stretches into two as the parents are placated, the local police called back to cordon off the area. An ambulance arrives, more a formality than anything else, though Will realizes belatedly that Mr. Nichols has gone into shock. He's not great with the living, and Jack is preoccupied, briefing his forensics team when they appear on the scene.

When he's allowed back into the bedroom at last, Elise's eyes are still closed. He probably has the EMT's to thank, and he will be thanking them, even though whoever's in charge of fingerprints will probably squawk. The living are more intrusive, but meeting the eyes of the dead can be unpleasant to say the least.

He circles the bed, tries to get a feel for the room, but his eyes won't leave the body. Quiet and still, she pulls at him, peace*ful in her sleep; he's sorry to have to wake her. The illusion will be shattered the moment she opens her eyes, but right now she's perfect. Which makes this hard, but if he doesn't--no. He has to. No choice. It's her or--no, it has to be her. It has to. So he can...he can at least make this quick. One step, two, and he--*

"You're Will Graham."

He comes back to himself with a jolt, his thoughts a jumbled mess. For a moment he's still the killer, and his first impulse is to take care of this nuisance before she can interrupt. She's not--

"--supposed to be in here," he hears himself say, and it throws him off again. Is that him or the killer talking? And who--why is there--wasn't Jack supposed to keep everyone out?

"You wrote the standard monograph on time of death by insect activity."

No, he--did he? Oh. Yes. He did. This stranger seems far more certain of it--sounds impressed, even. She's smiling, like she's happy to meet him, but that's not going to last. Already the admiring smile is fading as he refuses to meet her eyes, all but shivering where he stands as he tries to sort out who he is.

Jack comes in to call the woman to heel, but the damage has already been done. Will's lost, too distracted to protest as the rest of Jack's team files in after him, congregating around the bed, where he does (not) want them. The girl is (his, damn it, not his) and they're just going to (ruin everything) get it all wrong. This isn't what (*he*) wanted.

(But then, he didn't want to get stuck halfway in the mind of a killer, either, only thanks to one untimely interruption, that's exactly where he--)

"I found antler velvet in two of the wounds," the woman announces. "Like she was gored."

"Well, that's going to make this easy," a dark-haired man says with a snort. "We'll just check the tithe registry for Others with a nice rack."

An older man with thinning hair grimaces, unconvinced. "One of the Thousand would be the obvious culprit, but it'd be a bit like signing your name, wouldn't it?"

"No." All eyes turn to him. "No, our killer is human."

"Uh...antler velvet?" the first man reminds, as if Will just needs his memory jogged. Will doesn't miss the skeptical look, knows exactly what it means. Someone's heard some wild rumor about him and thinks he's speaking from a sense of solidarity, not wanting to throw one of his own under the bus.

"Antler velvet is rich in nutrients," Will points out, the killer's mind slipping away from his reluctantly. "It actually promotes healing. He may have put it in there on purpose."

Jack frowns. "You think he was trying to heal her?"

Will takes a deep breath, fortifying his defenses against anything else that might try to creep in. "He wanted to undo as much as he could. Given that he'd already killed her," he allows.

"Not at the top of his congregation's hierarchy, then," the older of the two men says, "or else his patron isn't big on do-overs."

"He put her back where he found her," Jack muses aloud, ignoring the other's attempt at levity in favor of feeling his way towards the conclusions Will's already reached.

Will shakes his head. "Whatever he did to the others, he couldn't do it to her."

"Is this his golden ticket?" Jack asks.

It's a logical conclusion to reach, but.... "No. This is an apology."

And now that he has their attention--

"Does anyone have any aspirin?"

Gods, his head is killing him.

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He's introduced to the team afterwards: Katz, for whom the shine has definitely worn off; Zeller the skeptic and Price with his gallows humor. He returns their greetings civilly enough, but after standing over the corpse of a girl and seeing his own hands around her throat, any real friendliness is beyond him. He just wants to get home, bury himself in dogs, and pretend this night never happened.

It seems like Fate when a new dog is thrown into his path a few miles from his house. It has a collar, but it's trailing a severed rope, and who leaves a dog tied up like that? Someone who doesn't deserve a dog, that's who.

Will takes him home, cleans him up, and for a little while feels like maybe he's a positive force in this world.

All that's gone when he returns to work and finds his classes have vanished out from under him, his office desk piled high with copies of police reports and photographs of the missing eight. He feels like the miller's hapless daughter, only the gold Jack's expecting him to spin from this dross is a killer's name.

He reads until his eyes burn, but nothing's connecting. He knows the girls aren't being abducted from their campuses, but he can't figure out how the killer's finding them at all. Did he meet them at the school? And why do they trust him enough to let him get close in the first place? Is he a guest lecturer? A substitute teacher? Someone in a position of authority, but anyone who'd worked at all eight campuses would've tripped an alarm by now. Maybe he's not thinking in broad enough terms.

When climbing the walls starts to sound preferable to turning another page, he forces himself to get up and take a walk. In hindsight that may have been a mistake. Jack comes looking for him and seems to take Will's absence from his desk, *any* break from obediently poring over case notes, as a personal affront.

"What are you doing in here?" Jack demands as he strides into the restroom, and for a moment Will just can't wrap his brain around the question. It doesn't help that he'd actually come to dunk his head in the sink, which he only managed by pointedly not thinking about the fact that he's in a public restroom in the first place. He *really* hopes the FBI janitors are as good as they ought to be, but the momentary relief from the pounding in his head is probably worth it.

"I enjoy the smell of urinal cake," he replies flippantly, hoping the oblique reminder--*urinal*, Jack?--might clue Jack in to his off behavior.

"Me too," Jack replies without an ounce of humor. "We need to talk."

To say Will is startled when Jack immediately turns and bellows another man out of the room is an understatement. It's a fear tactic, pure and simple--a display of temper Will can't quite complain about since it wasn't directed at him--and it takes him back to high school in a way he thought he'd escaped. When Jack turns back to him, he looks down and away. The last thing he needs is to turn this into a full-blown confrontation.

"You respect my judgment, Will? Hm?"

At the moment? No. Not at all. Not even a little bit. He nods anyway, forces out a, "Yes."

"Good. Because we will stand a better chance of catching this guy with you in the saddle."

Will doesn't appreciate being cornered at the best of times, but being cornered in a men's room and told he *isn't doing his job?*

"Yeah, I'm in the saddle," Will insists. "Just...confused which direction I'm pointing." Jack doesn't so much roll his eyes as look to an invisible audience to see if they find it as hard to believe what they're hearing as he does--and yet Will doesn't hear him offering up any theories of his own. "I don't know this kind of psychopath," he tries to explain. "I've never read about him. I don't even know if he's a psychopath. He's not insensitive; he's not shallow." There's more to their killer than just *me, me, me*. His entire pathology is centered around *we*.

"You know something about him," Jack insists. "Otherwise you wouldn't have said 'This is an apology.' What is he apologizing for?"

Unable to remain in place, Will takes two steps away and turns, beginning to pace. "He couldn't honor her. He feels bad," he sums up in case Jack needs a translation, breaking it down to basics.

"Well, feeling bad defeats the purpose of being a psychopath, doesn't it?"

"Yes!" Will pounces, hammering home the source of his own frustration in the hopes that Jack will finally get it. "It does!"

"Then what kind of crazy is he?" Jack shouts, like he can drive the answers out of Will by force of volume alone.

He meets Jack's eyes for a heartbeat and it's like the ground opens up beneath him. In that instant he's not staring at a man but a gaping, empty hole dug by frustration and fury. Jack is a hunt with no end, a dog left to run after a quarry that's no longer there, and it's cracked something inside him he has no interest in fixing.

The moment Jack realizes he's being read, he backs off, but it takes longer than that for Will to dismiss the vision of Jack as a hungry, man-shaped void. Because that's the thing about having a hole inside you: most people will go to any lengths to fill them up.

He knows right then that he has a choice and that the smart one would be to run. Leave Jack to his obsessions and his heavy-handed attempts to bully the world into giving him whatever it is he's missing. The only thing that stops him is a face he can't quite see, though he's seen her reflection eight times in eight imperfect mirrors.

Somewhere out there is a girl he *can* save, and he owes it to her to try.

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Jack knows he can be a little intense at times. He'd tone it back, but it gets results, and results are what matter in the Bureau. Most of the time he doesn't let it bother him.

Most of the time he doesn't have some gifted human staring at him like he's looked into Jack's soul and found it too Other for comfort.

It's the stress, probably. Will's been on the verge of cracking from the minute he stepped into the Nichols' home. And maybe Jack had gone a bit too hard trying to shake him out of his dithering, because it's clear to Jack that if Will would just stop second-guessing himself, they might actually get somewhere. Still. He doesn't actually want to cause a breakdown, and he knows his own limits. He's no one's go-to for delicate handling, and he's not ashamed to look for help.

Alana Bloom is very good at what she does. She may not make the intuitive leaps Jack needs from his people, but she's very good at making human connections. People trust her; they *want* to talk to her. She's the only psychiatrist to have walked out of an interview with Abel Gideon with more answers than questions--*with* her patience intact. He's sure she could provide a grounding influence for Graham if she'd just agree to try.

"You've been observing him while you've been guest-lecturing here at the academy, yes?"

She'd given him a look when he'd appeared in her lecture hall, but it's a nice day. He can walk a colleague to her car, stretch his legs and maybe shoot the breeze, can't he?

"I've never been in a room alone with Will," Alana replies. It's such an odd observation, there has to be more behind it.

"Why not?"

"Because I want to be his friend. And I am."

"It seems a shame not to take advantage. Academically speaking," he's quick to add, just to see if she'll be tempted, though he wonders now what he's tempting her with. Access, but to what? A psychological curiosity or--

"You already asked me to do a study on him, Jack," she reminds him, a hint of weariness creeping into her tone. He's only asked the once; who else has been leaning on her to do the same? "I said no. Anything scholarly on Will Graham would have to be published posthumously," she adds, but he's not interested in her bibliography. What she publishes and when is of no concern to him.

"So you've never been alone with him because you have a professional curiosity about him." He doesn't want to call bullshit on a lady, but something in that excuse definitely smells.

She gives him an arch look but keeps smiling, ignoring his insinuations as she takes a deep breath. "Normally I wouldn't even broach this, but what do you think one of Will's strongest drives is?"

That's not the tack he's expecting her to take, and he has to stop and think for a moment, folding his arms as she watches him expectantly. What drives Will Graham? Justice, obviously, or he wouldn't be working in law enforcement...but he doesn't think that's the answer Alana's looking for. Mercy? The drive to protect, a sense of responsibility for those

weaker than him? That last must be strong; it's likely what's kept him going on this case despite his obvious--

"Fear," Jack realizes aloud, seeing Will's recent actions in a new light. The tremble in his mouth, the occasional sheen in his eyes: that wasn't some sentimental pushover over-empathizing with the victims; that was terror, tamped down over and over again so Will can do his job. "Will Graham deals with huge amounts of fear."

Alana nods, still waiting.

"It comes with his imagination," Jack concedes with a frown.

"It's the price of imagination," Alana corrects him, moving in for the kill. He sees now where she's going, that he can argue until he's blue in the face and get nowhere. Alana sees Will's gift as a problem. To Jack it's a necessity.

"Alana, I wouldn't put him out there if I didn't think I could cover him." She doesn't say a word, but her arched brow speaks volumes. "All right, if I didn't think I could cover him eighty percent."

"I wouldn't put him out there," she counters, shoulders lifting as her chin tilts stubbornly up.

"He's out there," Jack says, biting off each word slowly and deliberately. There's no arguing a done deal. "I need him out there. Should he get too close, I need you to make sure he's not out there alone."

He thinks for a moment that she'll cave to the inevitable, but then she shakes her head. "I'm not the right person for this, Jack."

"Because you'd have to be alone with him?" he can't resist sniping.

One corner of her mouth twitches; it's the only sign he gets that he ruffled her at all. "Because we *are* friends. I'd go too easy on him, or else I'd overcompensate. Professional boundaries don't exist just to avoid lawsuits."

He lets that dig flow off him with a brusque headshake. "Then give me someone he will listen to, because I'm pretty sure that's a short list."

She opens her mouth to refuse, he can tell by the glint in her eye, but something stops her. "Actually there might be someone. I don't know if he'd be interested, but I'd trust him to approach Will as a person, not a paper."

"And who is this miracle man?"

Alana snorts, eyes dancing. "Hannibal Lecter," she replies before he can ask what's so funny. "He has a practice in Baltimore now, but he was my mentor at Johns Hopkins."

Jack frowns. "Hannibal Lecter. The *Other* Hannibal Lecter?" It's impossible to keep up with every Other out there, even the ones in his immediate jurisdiction, but a few stand out. The

Chesapeake Ripper, for one--despite current popular opinion, Jack's sure it's an Other, though humans involved in the black market meat trade aren't unheard of.

Dr. Lecter's on the opposite side of that scale. Where the Ripper's kills are clean, impersonal, bland as a butcher shop window, Dr. Lecter elevates his monthly tithes to works of art. Macabre art to be sure, but even Jack can almost appreciate it if he lets himself forget the focal pieces were once human. The man has a cult following, for gods' sake, as much for his habit of choosing genuinely unpleasant people as for the designs he creates. High society loves him. Edgy kids with warped ideas of romance *offer* themselves as tithes in the hopes of being immortalized. As far as Jack knows, Lecter never takes them up on it. Lecter is one of the Thousand, was spawned to hunt.

"No," Alana says with an innocent smile, "it's definitely the one you're thinking of."

Jack rolls his eyes. Like he hasn't heard that joke a thousand times. "I don't intend to ask a boon," he warns.

"And he probably wouldn't grant you one if you did," Alana fires back. "Hannibal does things on his own terms, and if there's anything he despises more than the rude, it's being treated like a wish-dispensing genie."

"So why even approach him? Other than an excuse to make a kill, what do we have that he'd even want?" Lecter's not like the new-spawned: alone, like as not newly-orphaned if their carrier was human. He's established, respected, with no need for money or fame.

Alana hunches a shoulder, tipping her head to the side. "A challenge? He gets bored, but he likes interesting situations and people. I think Will would give him both."

"He'd be a challenge, all right," Jack agrees, sighing. "All right, then. When you--"

"Oh, no," Alana interrupts, holding up a hand. "I told you, Jack--I wouldn't put him out there, however good the safety net. If you want this, it's all on you."

Great. She'll show him the brass ring, but grabbing it is up to him.

Luckily he's always had pretty good aim.

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Will has spent nearly his entire life feeling like a third wheel. It's a slightly novel experience to feel like an unneeded fourth. It's obvious Jack's team has worked together before; Price and Zeller banter like they're rehearsing to take their show on the road, while Katz and Zeller bicker like siblings. Will's presence at Elise Nichols' autopsy feels like a formality; they're all well aware that Jack wants him there to *look* more than to listen.

So he looks, past the face that haunted his sleep the night before, to the wounds that hadn't bled nearly as much as his dreams had painted: velvet-lined--they pin their prey--pinned like a butterfly to a board--

"Other injuries were probably, but not conclusively, post-mortem," Zeller announces, his pompous tone breaking into Will's thoughts. "So, *not* gored."

"She has lots of piercings that look like they were caused by deer antlers," Katz counters, uncowed. "I didn't say the deer was responsible for *putting* them there."

Zeller lifts both hands, placating in the face of Katz' ire. Some other time Will would find the social dynamics in this room distantly interesting, but his head's too full for that now. "She was mounted on them," he says, not really caring if they believe him or not. "Like hooks. She may have been bled."

There's no 'may' about it, but his certainty tends to bother people. It's a short jump to them wondering how he could know so much, even with his gift, and they're already giving him that look that says his weird party trick isn't appreciated.

"Her liver was removed," Zeller goes on, visibly shaking off Will's strangeness.

"You see that?" Price points at something in the open abdominal cavity that Will can't make out from where he's standing, well away from the autopsy table.

"He took it out and then....yep," Zeller says, pulling the incision wider and sliding his fingers in. Meat shifts with a wet, sucking pull. "He put it back in."

Price frowns. "Huh. Why would he cut it out if he's just gonna sew it back in again?"

The answer comes along with a rush of saliva to Will's mouth. He's going to tell himself it's the precursor to nausea. "There was something wrong with the meat."

They're staring at him again, but Zeller's eyes are almost accusing. "She has liver cancer."

Will nods shakily, his hypothesis confirmed. "He's, um...he's eating them."

"Still think it's not an Other?" Zeller asks with a tight, insincere smile.

"I don't know," Price says thoughtfully, "would that even matter to one of them? I mean, meat is meat, right?"

Katz snorts. "Maybe, but would you rather sit down in the restaurant or dig through the trash out back?"

Price makes a face, but Zeller's on a roll.

"Well, if something is eating them--"

"Some*one*," Price chides him, huffing at Zeller's muttered apology, "and it's not as if Others have cornered the market on that, so to speak. Donner party, anyone?"

"Huh." Katz straightens, shifting back on her heels. "Speaking of markets...."

Zeller looks from her to Price and back again, Will thoroughly ignored. "What, you think someone's muscling in on the Ripper's territory?"

Katz shrugs. "Why not? There must be good money in it. Someone sees the Ripper doing it, maybe makes a lucky contact in the Other community...."

"And he's new at it," Price points out, "so he's probably not as good. Takes the bodies with him instead of butchering them at the kill sites. Less pressure means better cuts of meat."

"Except that doesn't explain why they all look the same," Will reminds them, trying not to snap. Something inside him is snarling at the idea of being thought a common butcher. Can't they see these girls are more than that? "No, there's...he wouldn't share. Not with anyone who wouldn't appreciate the gift they're being given. These girls aren't for sale. They're *special*."

"So special he kills them," Katz mutters, half under her breath, but then she cracks a smile. "Sounds like about half the killers on record. Good point."

The remnant of the killer rattling around in Will's brain doesn't like that either, but Will shoves him down. *You see? There's nothing special about* you.

That shuts up his unwanted guest, at least for a little while. He'll take his victories where he can get them.

***

Jack's not sure what he's expecting from Lecter's Baltimore office. Gothic architecture, maybe, or hunting trophies: ram's horns in honor of his mother or twisted racks of antlers if they came from his vanquished siblings. He's relieved to find the place more closely resembles a library or a museum, though there's a tiny, disappointed part of him that wouldn't have minded being just a little bit shocked.

Maybe Will has a point about the Evil Minds name after all.

Lecter isn't quite what he was imagining either, though he's studied up on the man in preparation for this interview. He's tall, well-groomed, but even having been warned, Jack's not prepared for the spectacle of a powder-blue suit. A killer from the moment he was spawned, he should not be able to carry off pastels, but he looks...harmless. Approachable. Handsome, even, if you don't know what's hiding underneath. He's wearing his human suit, but surely something should slip through.

There's maybe something a little strange about the eyes, but beyond the muddy red hue and wary curiosity, Jack just can't put a finger on it.

Then Lecter says, "I'm beginning to suspect you're investigating me, Agent Crawford," and Jack feels a sudden shift in the air, the predator beginning to wake.

"No," Jack says with a chuckle he hopes sounds natural, needing to distance himself right now from the small-time, small-minded cops who pull investigations out of thin air to make Others' lives difficult. "No, I don't doubt you'd check out on the system if I were to look,

Doctor. You're very visible, after all. No, you were referred to me by Alana Bloom. In the psychology department at Georgetown."

Instantly the coldness he was sensing recedes, Lecter's marble face softening at last with a smile. Jack knows then that he's got him.

He just has no idea precisely what is waiting at the end of his hook, only that it's probably big enough to swallow him and his boat together.

***

The call from Jack comes just as Will's entering the building, before he even has time to set his things down in his office. He has a morning lecture he'd really like some time to prepare for, but Jack's "*I need you in my office. There's someone I want you to meet*," reminds him that his time is not currently his own.

"All right, just let me--"

"*Now, please*."

The 'please'--that's new. Jack must be trying to make a good impression.

Slipping into Jack's office, he finds a stranger studying the pinboard Jack has set up with a map of the various disappearances. He's no one Will recognizes from the job, but he displays none of the overblown concern or horror of a civilian trying to score bonus points with law enforcement by showing just how much they care. Lively curiosity lingers in his faint smile when he turns at Will's entrance, waiting for Jack to introduce them. Mostly Will notices the way the man's perfect posture and confident bearing don't quite match the informality of his understated suit. He hasn't dressed up; he's here in his comfortable Sunday clothes, for all that he makes Will feel like he could have put in a bit more effort himself.

"Will," Jack says, rising from his desk and sweeping a hand toward his guest. "I'd like you to meet Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Dr. Lecter, this is Special Agent Will Graham. Dr. Lecter has agreed to assist with the case."

"A pleasure to meet you," Lecter says, holding out a hand. Will has to meet him halfway, shifting his satchel and coat to one hand, but he returns the gesture politely, noting the lack of alpha male posturing in the evenness of Lecter's grip. He's more struck by the man's accent, unable to quite place its origins. Something European, not thick enough to distort his words. "Agent Crawford speaks highly of your skills."

"Ah, thanks," Will says, wishing he could return the compliment. Something about this surprise meeting feels like an ambush. Who is this Lecter, and why is he here? "So are you a doctor of medicine or psychology?"

"Both, as it happens, but I no longer practice the former. I believe my studies of the mind are why I've been invited here today."

Will makes a noncommittal noise as he takes the chair on the right, the one with his usual coffee mug already sitting before it on Jack's desk. Unaffected by Will's lack of conversational skills, Lecter's smile stretches fractionally wider before he turns back to the evidence board.

"Tell me then, how many confessions?"

"Twelve dozen, last time I checked," Jack replies tiredly, fists braced on his hips. "None of them had any details. Until this morning," he adds, returning to his chair with a grimace. "And then they all had details. Some genius in Duluth PD took a photograph of Elise Nichols' body with his cell phone, shared it with his friends, and then Freddie Lounds posted it on tattlecrime.com."

Will's finally shed the last sticky traces of the killer's mind, but he doesn't need a borrowed sense of outrage to be filled with disgust. "Tasteless," he mutters, glaring at nothing.

"Do you have trouble with taste?"

He almost looks Lecter full in the face out of sheer surprise. What kind of question is that? Is it a dig at the way he's dressed? The lack of social graces?

"My thoughts are often not tasty," he replies, curbing the urge to go toe to toe with the man. He may not have come from money the way Lecter clearly did, but he's long past the days when he'd let anyone shame him over that.

"Nor mine," Lecter replies with surprisingly little hesitation, preoccupied with leaning in for a better look at the girls' photographs. "No effective barriers."

Another odd admission; Will can't quite work out what he means. "Well, I build forts," he offers, retrieving the coffee someone left for him--black, still hot--to hide behind the mug.

"Associations come quickly."

"So do forts."

Lecter sinks into the chair on Will's left, retrieves his own coffee, and stops, turning to Will as if struck by some realization. "Not fond of eye contact, are you?"

Will takes a deep breath. Here it is again: someone who wants to test the rumors, to call him out on a lie or show off their mental defenses, or who just wants to see the magic happen. No one ever seems to consider that he doesn't *want* to see what's inside them. He's like a carnival funhouse: a cheap scare they can walk away from, while he's left dealing with the trash they leave behind.

"Eyes are distracting," he says, anger starting to boil to the surface. "You see too much, you don't see enough. And it's hard to focus when you're thinking--"

He's already relaxing his guard a fraction as he turns, eyes lifting to meet Lecter's, and then--

Darkness. Not impenetrable. Not metaphorical. He hears insects, the rustle of leaves, the faint trickle of water somewhere close. The trees stand tall all around, their trunks just far enough apart to let in the light of the moon. Straining his eyes, he turns a slow circle, convinced he's not alone, but he sees no one, just him and the trees and--

A hand falls on his shoulder from behind, stilling his circling with gentle pressure, though it could break his bones with no effort at all. And that's unsettling, because it shouldn't be his *bones, only he hasn't broken though anything. He hasn't become the Other in this place; he's only been invited in*.

Will blinks, then blinks again as the lights of Jack's office suddenly register on his brain. Gods. Dr. Lecter isn't human. He's not sure how he missed it before.

Untroubled by the invasion, Lecter murmurs, "Fascinating."

"What?" Will croaks, still trying to regain his bearings.

"Ah...sorry, Dr. Lecter," Jack jumps in, though Will doesn't think he sounds sorry at all. He probably can't wait to pick Will's brain for whatever he saw. "I should have warned you about Will's gift. It's not something we really understand--it doesn't show up on any test--"

"What you have," Lecter interrupts, speaking directly to Will, "is pure empathy. You can assume my point of view, or Jack's, or maybe some other points of view you may find unsettling." He inclines his head in acknowledgment and apology, but Will's too distracted to properly take note of either.

"Wait, what?" he echoes himself, shaking his head. "How do you--what makes you think you know?"

"Because it's kin to my own gift," Lecter replies with a shrug, sitting back in his chair again. "Maybe not close kin, but close enough. You read hearts; I see the basic nature of a thing. My Mother's people call it the knowing sense, and it's as intrinsic to me as your empathy is to you. It *is* your baseline; the tests available at present detect only fluctuations, abnormalities, not what's always there."

"Then what...where did it come from?" Will asks, glancing nervously at Jack. "Could it be a holdover from a boon, or...?"

"It's doubtful," Lecter says, taking a mouthful of coffee at last. It might not meet his standards; he sits forward to set the cup down again a moment later, though his expression remains serene. "The attention of a god is hard to catch, and the power of their children is limited to what agrees with our natures. As I'm sure you can imagine, empathy is not a trait many of us would hold in a positive light."

At least he's honest about it, and about Will's gift. It may not be the comprehensive explanation he's wanted all his life, but at least it's something. Now if Lecter would just stop staring at him like there's more of the puzzle to be figured out....

"I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind," Lecter muses aloud, his voice a calm rumble. "Your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations. Appalled at your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love."

It's like that brief moment of connection had gone both ways, but hearing himself discussed so candidly reminds him of every doctor and every agent who'd felt the need to pick him apart to inform him why he's a murder waiting to happen. "Whose profile are you working on?" he demands, turning to Jack in outrage before Lecter can answer. "Whose profile is he working on?"

"Not yours," Jack replies shortly. "You know there's been some question whether the killer is an Other. On the off-chance he is, Dr. Lecter's agreed to assist us."

"Come on, Jack," Will groans, frustrated. "This isn't the Chesapeake Ripper. He's not butchering those girls for the table."

"But he is still eating them, yes?" Lecter asks, head cocked at a curious tilt. "What makes you so certain they're unrelated?"

Will huffs a humorless laugh, shaking his head. "The Ripper sees his victims as cattle. No, pigs. In his eyes, they've got only one purpose, and all he's doing is making them useful. Whoever's abducting these girls is...he's careful about it. It has to be the *right* girl, or it's no good. You said yourself your kind aren't sentimental--"

"Ah. Forgive me, but that's not precisely what I said," Lecter interrupts with another faint smile. "We may find it difficult as a rule to forge personal connections, but we're not incapable. It's just that most find the risks far outweigh the rewards.

"Regardless," he adds while Will's still digesting that, "I do take your point. You think the killer is looking for a substitute in these girls, but that's a more human trait than you may realize. Your eyes may be fooled by appearances," he explains, tapping his nose with the side of one forefinger, "but our senses are not.

"Well," he says, rising without warning, "if it is indeed a cannibal you're looking for, I may still be of use to you even if the culprit turns out to be human. Let me think on it, gentlemen, but I do believe I can help you see his face. Jack? I'll be in touch," he promises, and with a final look and a genteel nod for Will, he sweeps out the door before either Jack or Will can call him back.

Will watches him go, safe enough with Lecter's back to him, before turning again to Jack.

"What is he?" he asks bluntly, uncaring for once if it makes him sound prejudiced. He needs a species, though knowing Lecter's strangeness comes from his mother's side narrows it down considerably, as does Will's vision of a dark wood.

"Young. One of the Thousand," Jack clarifies, as if Will could possibly have thought he was referring to Lecter's age. "One of the first among the Thousand, if what I hear is correct."

Will grimaces. The way Lecter holds himself, it figures. "So he killed and ate his way to the top?" It's not really his place to be judgmental about it. It's what the children of the Black Mother *do*.

"Look at it this way. There's that much fewer of them to demand a tithe."

"They're called the Thousand for a reason, Jack," Will reminds him, tossing back the last of his coffee. "There's always one more."

He's honestly not sure what to make of Dr. Lecter. Will hunts men like him if they're human; it doesn't quite seem fair that an accident of birth gives the Others a free pass. Then again, a lamb probably thinks the same thing about the wolf. From all he's ever heard, killing isn't a hobby for them; it's a matter of diet, a need that can be curtailed, but only for so long.

It's a little surprising to him that Lecter's interactions with them bore no taint of perceived superiority, despite the fact that everyone in this building, human or otherwise, was potentially on the menu. The Thousand have a reputation. They're also the least likely to settle in one place, conform to the Compact, establish a reputation more complex than 'keep away.'

"You really think he's going to help us stop a killer?" Will wants to believe he will. He just doesn't see why Lecter should.

"I think we've managed to catch his interest, and that he's invested in seeing how things turn out."

He stares at Jack a long moment, wondering why he looks so smug. There's a touch of disbelief in his tone, a hint of triumph gathering at the corners of his mouth. He thinks he's pulled something over on Lecter. The proprietary weight of his gaze makes Will wonder if that something is him.

Chapter 3

Will's not surprised to get a call summoning him to a crime scene. He'd told Jack that their killer would strike again soon. He just wasn't expecting to find a body when he arrives, and that's only the beginning of all the things wrong with the grim tableau that greets him.

They're a long way from the safety of a childhood bedroom. The open field where the newest girl is displayed isn't well-traveled, but it's not so remote the body was in any danger of being overlooked. The circling of crows might not have raised any red flags, but even a casual glance would have caught on the anomaly of pale limbs, a slender body floating naked and defenseless above the dry grass. It needs a second look to really take in the sharp tines piercing soft tissue from beneath, the stag's head braced upright in a cairn of rocks, holding the girl cradled in its antlers.

Zeller, walking ahead, jogs the last few paces to the body, arms waving. The crows investigating their lucky find flee at his approach. Price casts a dark look at the preoccupied uniforms milling around the field and shakes his head, mouth tight.

Will's footsteps falter the closer he gets. Jack, keeping pace with him, slows as well, eyeing him expectantly as Will shuffles to a halt. This is...he doesn't know what this is. It's not supposed to be here; he knows that for certain.

"The stag head was reported stolen last night," Jack starts filling him in, "about a mile from here."

"Just the head?"

Wasteful, some part of Will mourns, *to leave all that meat behind*.

"Minneapolis Homicide's already made a statement. They're calling him the Minnesota Shrike."

"Like the bird?"

"Shrike's a perching bird," Price says, straightening from his examination of the body. "Impales mice and lizards on thorny branches and barbed wire. Rips their organs right out of their bodies, puts them in a little birdy pantry, and eats them later."

That's...charming. Really.

"I can't tell whether it's sloppy or shrewd," Jack grumbles.

"He wanted her found this way," Will says, edging reluctantly closer to kneel beside the body. "I almost feel like he's mocking her. Or mocking us," he allows.

Jack leans in for a closer look, expression frozen in weary disappointment. Anger, Will doesn't doubt, will come later. "Where did all his love go?"

His words are a catalyst, clarifying the soup of contradictions in Will's brain. "Whoever tucked Elise Nichols into bed didn't paint this picture."

"He took her lungs," Zeller says: informing, not disagreeing. "I'm...pretty sure she was alive when he cut them out."

That's more evidence than Will needs that this is the work of someone new. "Our cannibal *loves* women. He doesn't want to destroy them. He wants to *consume* them, to keep some part of them inside." As Jack's frown turns thoughtful, Will rises to his feet again, pointing at the display. "This girl's killer thought that she was a pig."

Something niggles at the back of his head, but he can't look at this any longer. The innocence and affection he'd seen in the Nichols' house is utterly missing here. This is theater, a canvas, deceptively simple but masterfully composed, the girl at its center both necessary and interchangeable.

"You think this was a copycat?" Jack calls after him as Will starts to stalk away.

Will turns back, inexplicably angered by the question. "The cannibal who killed Elise Nichols had a place to do it and no interest in...in *field Kabuki*," he all but snarls. "So--he has a house," he raps out, counting off on his fingers the points bursting rapid-fire into light in his brain, "or two, or a cabin--something with an antler room." It's all so clear to him now, which only makes the next realization so jarring. How did he ever miss this?

"He has a daughter. The same age as the other girls. Same...same hair color, same eye color, same height, same weight.... She's an only child." Obvious. Damn it, so obvious. "She's leaving home." To college, of course: all those trips to find her new place in the world. "He can't stand the thought of losing her."

And he won't, not ever, if he makes her a part of him. If he carries her inside, the way her mother had, but not...quite.

"She's his golden ticket."

And if she weren't already, she's in twice the danger now. If a statement's been made, then this has already hit the news, and all the wrong people will see it. Her father. The girl. It may push him to act faster, her to do something foolish out of fear. They need to find the two of them quickly, before it's too late.

The chirping of Zeller's phone shakes them all out of the silent contemplation they've fallen into, Zeller scrambling to silence it with the sheepish grimace of a man surprised by a text in a darkened theater. Jack scowls and abruptly shakes his head. "What about the copy--"

"*Shit*," Zeller breathes, eyes huge as he scrambles four steps back from the body as if burned. "Uh...Jack? I've...got a positive ID on the girl."

Jack's eyes narrow sharply. "How."

"I put in a request with the registry to see if any tithes had been claimed in the area. Antlers," he explains with a grimace. "Got me thinking. And...meet Cassie Boyle," he says with a nod at the corpse, then a few more nods, as if he's gotten stuck that way. He stops with an uncertain look at Jack, almost a question. "She's Dr. Lecter's registered tithe."

Apparently it's his week for blindness, because Will really feels like he ought to have seen this too.

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It's a long day and a longer night. Will would really like to go home to his dogs, but Jack's got him staying in Duluth, and he can't say he disagrees with the idea. He'll do more good in Minnesota than he would in Virginia, and if they're going to catch the Shrike, they need to work fast.

His dreams that night are filled with a massive black stag, its shaggy pelt shot through with raven feathers. It's not unsettling in itself, but the expectant way it looks at him, his inability to divine what it wants, leaves him slightly unnerved. His lack of understanding feels like failure.

The sky he glimpses through a crack in the heavy curtains is still grey when he's jolted from sleep by a knock on his motel door. For half a second he lies perfectly still, heart pounding as he grips the mattress like it might buck him off. Door. That was someone at the door. It's probably Jack coming to tell him off for wasting precious time on sleep.

He's so certain of this, he doesn't even peer through the spyhole, so finding Dr. Lecter on his doorstep brings him up short. Some distant part of him flirts with the idea of being terrified, but he just can't muster the energy between his broken sleep and the dull throb of a constant, low-grade headache. Mostly he's struck by how normal Lecter still looks, pleasant and relaxed and not monstrous at all.

"Good morning, Will," Lecter greets him with a smile. "May I come in?"

Will stares. That's really how he's going to play this? Waltz in like this is a typical day and they're typical coworkers who've never made pretentious art from the body of a dead girl?

"Where's Crawford?" he asks, looking past Hannibal in the vague hope of finding a distraction.

"Deposed in court. The adventure will be yours and mine today."

Wait, Crawford *left* Will to Lecter? Alone? Will feels his anger spiking anew, but this time Crawford's not there to play unwilling audience. There's just Lecter, who can only be here with Jack's blessing.

Whatever Lecter said to smooth the waters with Crawford had better be damn convincing, or Will's going to kick him out on his ear, Other or not.

"You have some nerve, I'll give you that," Will growls, even as he steps aside.

Lecter's brows arch in mild surprise. "Is this about the tithe?" he asks as he steps inside, closing the door behind him. It instantly plunges the room into gloom, drips a cold shiver down Will's spine as instinct reminds him he's alone in the dark with a creature that could eat him alive if it hadn't already fed. Will's too angry to care.

"*Yes* it's about the--do you honestly have to ask? Because facetious isn't a good look on anyone, Doctor."

Lecter tilts his head a fraction, setting a bag down on the small table by the window. "By the terms of the Compact--"

"No," Will cuts him off, slashing a hand through the air even as he's batting the curtains open a crack so he can look Lecter dead in the eye, every defense raised against what might intrude. "This has nothing to do with the Compact. This is about you making some backhanded point about what we were too slow to see when you could have just told us what you knew."

"But I didn't know," Lecter replies simply, derailing the rest of Will's rant. That--but he-- "I knew what your killer wasn't. Not kin, not to me or to any of mine. Not naturally a hunter of men. I showed you what a true hunter would do; were you able to learn from it?"

"You know I was," Will grits out, only slightly mollified. "Crawford must have told you." Lecter inclines his head. He's so matter-of-fact, neither apologetic nor smug. Emotionless, some might think, except Lecter doesn't strike him that way at all. "That was still out of line. Nobody asked you to--"

"No one in the FBI," Lecter cuts in smoothly, tilting his chin down to fix Will with a pointed stare. "But several of the victims' families entered a plea for justice with the registry, as is their right. Jack seemed quite pleased, considering I've effectively bound myself to this case until its completion. I merely chose to kill two birds with one stone."

Will is honestly dumbstruck. Did he just--? "That was horrible, Doctor," he grumbles. A bird pun? Really?

Unabashed, Lecter's mouth curls up in a tiny little grin. "I would apologize for my sense of humor, but I know I'll soon be apologizing again. You'll tire of that eventually, so I have to consider using apologies sparingly."

"Just keep it professional," Will warns. "And *don't* do that again. I'm not consenting to be part of your meal plans, Doctor. If you want me to consider some angle, try talking to me first."

"I suspect that would make for some interesting conversations. We might even manage to socialize like adults."

Will snorts, turning away at last to go find some pants. "Socializing isn't really my specialty, thanks. And I don't find you that interesting."

"You will," Lecter replies with a touch of amusement. "I do hope your intention to avoid my cooking isn't absolute," he adds, unzipping the bag he brought. "I thought I might offer you

breakfast. Something to start the day properly."

Will shakes his head in disbelief. "You really think I'm going to eat that?"

"I don't see why not," Lecter says innocently, laying out two plates, two covered ceramic bowls. Even through the close-fitting lids, the contents smell fantastic.

"Should I even ask what's in there--or rather, who?"

"Now that would be terribly rude of me," Lecter says, eyes dancing as he pulls out a chair, angles it toward Will, then circles the small table to take a seat on the opposite side. "Like offering only one option to someone with an allergy, wouldn't you say? Or serving myself fish," he says with a nod at his own container, "when dining with someone opposed to the smell. I'd be a terrible host in either case."

Will frowns, edging hesitantly closer. Is he saying his own breakfast is human-free? It would certainly be the polite thing, considering Lecter's present company. Deciding to chance it, he joins Lecter at the table; he's half-seated when Lecter's smile goes sly, amusement bubbling over.

"Of course, it might be a different story were you to attend one of my dinner parties."

Will freezes until Lecter's precise wording catches up to him. "'Might?'" he echoes, sinking the rest of the way onto the creaky motel chair.

"It's a game my guests like to play amongst themselves. I believe they call it 'eating at the cannibal's table.' It goes something like: he can't possibly be feeding us all human, so is it my dish or is it yours that's tainted?"

Will blinks. "I can't tell if you're joking or not."

Hannibal snorts. "Oh, I assure you, they're quite in earnest. People love to flirt with the taboo. Stand as close as they can to what they fear."

"And if I were to just...ask you beforehand not to? Politely?" Wil adds, remembering the other thing Jack told him Lecter is famous for.

One corner of Lecter's mouth quirks up in wry acknowledgement. "You could also ask me rudely; I may very well have given you cause. But certainty would spoil the game, and you'd be surprised how many neglect such simple courtesies."

It sounds...frustrating. And familiar: Lecter's guests turning an invitation to share a meal, one of the most basic social rituals, into a game of chicken akin to meeting Will's eyes.

He looks again at his plate, the covered bowl centered atop it, and considers his options. He could ask again what he's being served--Lecter hadn't actually said, only that it would be rude of him not to allow for another choice--but if he has to ask, he can't trust anything at Lecter's table, can he? Including Lecter himself.

Pulling the top off the container releases a cloud of steam. It smells heavenly.

"A little protein scramble to start your day," Lecter says, voice warm. "Some eggs, some sausage...."

Will huffs a quiet laugh as he picks up his fork, spearing a chunk of sausage first. Challenge accepted.

Then he takes a bite and actually stops chewing in surprise. "This is delicious," he mumbles through one side of his mouth before he remembers his manners. It's also, unless Lecter is a wizard with his spices, chicken.

Lecter's eyes crinkle at the corners as his smile deepens. "Thank you. I'm always grateful for an appreciative audience."

Was that another reference to his murder art? It was, wasn't it? "I can tell working with you is going to be fun," Will sighs.

Lecter looks pleased. "Indeed. We'll have to do it again sometime. Under better circumstances, of course."

"You sure you're not working on my profile?" Will asks, suspicious. He can count the number of people who actually want to work with him on one hand, with fingers left over. Most days he's fine with that.

Lecter's brows arch as he lifts his eyes back up from his own plate in surprise. "Jack did ask--not that I compose a profile on you, but that I act as an unofficial therapist. I declined."

Will sits back, setting his fork down a little too hard. "What?"

"It's difficult enough to enter into a doctor-patient relationship when the patient is willing. You seem more than capable of making well-reasoned choices concerning your own care; if you choose to seek my professional services, it will be entirely your choice."

"Then why are you even here?"

Lecter regards him thoughtfully, but when he answers, it has the ring of truth. "Curiosity. Jack seems to think of you as a fragile little teacup."

Will snorts. "You think he's wrong?" Lecter's chiding look says that's exactly what he thinks. "Then what do you see me as, Doctor?"

There's a lazy satisfaction in Lecter's smile Will doesn't know what to do with, as if Lecter's finding some obscure enjoyment in just looking at him. "The mongoose I want under the house," he says cryptically, "when the snakes slither by."

And with that he gestures at Will's plate, saying, "Finish your breakfast, Will. We've a Shrike to net, yes?"

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They take Will's rental when they leave the motel. Lecter's in a better mood than Will expects; this part of the job is usually boring, and he's not entirely surprised Jack skipped out on it. He gives it an hour, tops, before Lecter's rookie excitement wears off.

Being behind the wheel with an erstwhile partner in tow takes him back, in a way riding with Crawford hadn't. It's impossible to think of Jack as anything but his boss, but even with Lecter being what he is, Wil's the one with all the experience. That sort of makes Lecter his responsibility, a fact he tries to remember when his natural inclinations lead him to be silent too long.

Not that Lecter seems to mind. He's still wearing the same look of indiscriminate enthusiasm when they turn off the paved road onto a dirt-and-gravel path, the wasteland of a construction site in its earliest stages looming ahead.

"What are you smiling at?" Will tries to inject a note of reprimand into his tone--this is a criminal investigation, not a weekend outing--but Lecter's good mood is infectious.

"Peeking behind the curtain," Lecter replies as his eyes rove over concrete pipes, two forklifts, building materials sheeted against the recent rains. "I'm just curious how the FBI goes about its business when it's not kicking in doors."

Will chuckles despite himself. There's no malice in Lecter's voice, though his words could have been interpreted as a dig. Will's not so removed from social contact that he can't recognize when he's being teased. "Aren't you lucky we're not doing house-to-house interviews," Will quips back. Lecter's been remarkably tolerant of Will's need for quiet; his patience should probably be rewarded. "We found a little piece of metal in Elise Nichols' clothes. A shred from a pipe threader."

Will's watching Lecter sidelong as Lecter stares ahead out the window; he still sees the exact moment Lecter's eyes sharpen from curiosity to predatory interest. It's a bit like a bird dog going on point: this place is interesting now in a way it wasn't before.

"There must be hundreds of construction sites all over Minnesota," Lecter points out. That's a conservative number, but Will takes his meaning.

"A certain kind of metal, certain kind of pipe, certain kind of pipe coatings...we're checking all the construction sites that use that kind of pipe." Will's good at what he does, but if it doesn't directly relate to people or what's left of people, he's not always clear on the specifics of where the forensics team gets their information. Maybe there's a database somewhere. He only knows they made a list; sifting those locations for clues is where he comes back in.

Lecter arches his brows, leaning over and in as he asks, "What are we looking for?"

"At this stage, anything, really," Will admits. Their killer had been frustratingly cagey until the mistake with Elise Nichols. At this point, he'll take whatever he can get. "But mostly anything peculiar."

He climbs out of the car then, not bothering to lock it up behind him. The site's makeshift office, a boxy prefab trailer destined to be hauled back out again when the real building goes up, sits just behind them. The car parked to their right suggests at least one person is already here.

The woman who answers their knock barely glances at Lecter, but the look she gives Will is far less impressed. Will doesn't have to meet her eyes to know her type: comfortably middle class, queen bee of her social circle, endlessly judgmental and convinced she's funny with it. Lecter gets a pass; even dressed down in another comfortable suit, he looks respectable. Will with his untamed hair and gun on his hip, unpressed shirt wilting in the humidity of the late fall rains, looks small-time by comparison.

Her opinion revises only slightly upward when he reveals he's FBI.

Lecter joins him at the file cabinets, pulling out personnel records and scanning through them before placing them into boxes with the others, but Will's not sure how much help he'll be. He's not sure how much help he is himself with no specific search in mind. Their best bet is probably to stop wasting time, crate everything up and drop it back at the motel to sort through later and move onto the next, but then something catches his eye.

"Garret Jacob Hobbs?"

***

"I take it we're not returning to the motel?" Lecter asks when it becomes obvious they're not retracing their steps. He sounds curious but not particularly bothered. Maybe he thinks they're headed for the next job site, that Will intends to see how many boxes of files he can pack into one vehicle.

Will pinches the bridge of his nose, bumping the glasses he wears mostly for reading and driving a little bit askew. "Look, I know you were just trying to help with that tithe, but once it gets out that an Other did it, not a copycat, our killer's probably going to panic. Being hunted by the FBI is one thing, but being hunted by an Other? Especially--no offence--one that was made to hunt? That's going to move his timetable up drastically."

"Or slow it down."

"Slow it--" Will darts a glance at his passenger, eyes making it as high as Lecter's sharp cheekbones before hanging there. "Why would that slow it down?"

"It's only the middle of the month. Technically I have another two weeks before I can claim another tithe, and since I accepted no less than three pleas to bring him to justice, he'd do well to consider himself marked."

Will frowns. "You think he expects you to kill him."

"He should," Lecter replies simply.

"Why?"

"Because there's no death penalty in the state of Minnesota, but the tithes granted by the Compact operate outside the legal system. A boon once claimed is a matter of public record; it would take very little effort on his part to discover that two of the three claims entered upon him call for his death."

Will opens his mouth and closes it with a snap, his hands clenching on the wheel. Part of him wants to pull the car over and ask Dr. Lecter to exit the vehicle, but he doesn't need any particular gift to see what a shitshow that would be. He takes a calming breath, glaring straight ahead. Did he not *just say* that he didn't want to be complicit in any more of Lecter's meals? "There's a legal process for a *reason*--"

Lecter chuckles, tipping his chin down like Will has said or done something charming. "While your dedication to the law is commendable, I'm afraid you're thinking too literally."

"Enlighten me," Will says through gritted teeth.

"Should he be captured today, there's nothing stopping me from waiting two weeks, or until the end of his trial, and simply presenting myself at the prison to claim my due."

Will lets out a slow breath, knowing Lecter is right. No one would stop him from doing just that. It's doubtful anyone would even complain. People would probably *thank* him for choosing to dine on a killer and not someone who'd be missed.

"Of course, he may simply assume I'll wait the two weeks and grow complacent," Lecter says thoughtfully. "Making a kill to fulfill a boon is one thing, but most wouldn't have the fortitude to resist harvesting their kill, and that can get one into a great deal of trouble."

Will frowns. "With...your last. You only took the lungs." He's made it a point all his life not to pay too much attention to Others, refusing to glorify or fear them. That said, even he can bring a few of Lecter's displays to mind if he digs, even if he hadn't paid much attention to the name of their creator at the time. Unlike most Others, who store up their monthly kills like provisions for a long winter, Lecter never takes enough to render them unrecognizable. "Do you always...? Sorry," he cuts himself off with a grimace. "That's really none of my--"

"I spent the first dozen or so years of my youth eating nothing more exotic than what the cook brought home from market," Lecter says with a smile gone wistful, "except on rare occasions. I suppose the habit stuck."

He doesn't sound angry, so it's unlikely he was caged, and the presence of a cook implies a certain amount of wealth. While most Others either learn to fend for themselves or stumble upon an enclave of their kind--or get eaten by larger predators, with the Compact's blessing--Lecter must have been one of the few to be raised by humans.

"I thought the tithe was something you needed." That's always been a sticking point in every negotiation, just how much Others are giving up already in order to keep the humans happy.

Now Will wonders if it isn't just to keep the humans complacent.

When he chances another look in Lecter's direction, realizing the man has gone silent too long, he finds not the panic of someone who's said too much but the distant look of a bad memory.

"The cravings are ignorable if it's all you've known," Lecter says at last, "and I didn't like the feel of the house after an exception was made. I tried not to encourage it. Would I have starved?" he asks rhetorically, shaking himself free of the past. "No. But I was very weak until I learned to hunt my own."

His own...meals? No. His own *kind*.

Will clears his throat. "Sorry," he says again. "I can usually be trusted not to ask glaringly insensitive questions if locked in an enclosed space with someone--"

"Because you prefer not to ask them questions at all?" Lecter asks with an innocent smile.

Will laughs, his shoulders relaxing for the first time since they returned to the car. "Guilty as charged. Look, if I cross a line, just tell me to redirect. I'll be more offended if you just let me continue to offend you."

"Not at all," Lecter says, turning his head to regard him directly. "Your curiosity is refreshing."

"And blunt?"

Lecter chuckles. "And blunt. But I prefer it to assumptions and poorly-drawn conclusions."

Will nods. Maybe Lecter won't be so difficult to work with after all. And it's just until the end of the case.

Though he's never been a morning person, he's glad now that Lecter woke him early. Hobbs' resignation letter had been recent, so recent he may well be between jobs at the moment. If they're lucky, they'll catch him home alone. If they're very lucky, he'll also be the man they're looking for.

The Hobbs' house sits near the edge of town, in that liminal mile where housing developments give way to scrubby fields and highways lined with rusty barbed wire fences. It's a nice enough neighborhood and a nice enough house, utterly normal.

They don't get halfway down the block before Lecter sits up straight, chin coming up like a cat spotting prey just beyond the tall grass. "Someone here is devout," he murmurs distractedly, prompting Will to lift his foot from the gas. "To my Mother. The trappings of Her worship have a very distinct flavor."

"Is that going to be a problem? If Hobbs is one of Hers." Assuming Hobbs turns out to be their killer, which...he's trying very hard not to make the exact same assumptions Lecter complained of, but it's hard to ignore the coincidence.

"No, not at all," Lecter says, leaning forward to peer past Will as they coast closer to the right house. "My Mother doesn't concern Herself with anything mortal. Short of one flinging themselves in Her path when She's hungry, She doesn't notice Her worshippers in the slightest."

"So you're not going to fight me if Hobbs turns out to be Her high priest?"

That finally catches Lecter's attention, but from the startled laugh that escapes him, it's the funniest thing Will has said all morning. "My dear Will," Lecter all but purrs, barely holding in his mirth, "if you want him that badly, he's yours."

"You're generosity itself, Dr. Lecter," Will drawls, finally turning the wheel over to pull into the Hobbs' driveway. He sits for a moment as he turns the key in the ignition, fishing in his pocket for the travel-sized bottle of aspirin that's been rattling around with his keys. His headache isn't bad yet, but he knows what's coming. Whether or not Hobbs is their killer, Will will have to read him either way, just to be certain. And if Hobbs does turn out to be the Shrike, and if he decides to run, or fight--

He shakes out two pills, ignoring Lecter's curious look, and swallows them dry.

"I know you have a claim," Will says, grimacing faintly as bitterness coats his tongue, "and I appreciate you telling me, but I'd like to handle this myself. Legal and aboveboard. Can we do that, or...?"

"Of course," Lecter says graciously. "I'd be happy to follow your lead."

True to his word, Lecter sits patiently until Will climbs out of the car, and even when he follows, he hangs back, standing straight and tall at the passenger side door to let Will choose how to proceed. Will eyes him for a moment, gauging how sincere he is with that promise, and when he turns back to the house--was that a flicker of moment at the front curtains?

"Doctor--"

"Yes," Lecter says: confirmation, not a question. He'd seen it too.

Will advances slowly, his spine and the back of his neck prickling. Certain he's being watched, he feels incredibly exposed, even with one of the Thousand playing backup. If Hobbs worships the Black Mother, he's probably a hunter of some stripe, and that usually means guns. If he shoots through a window--

Will freezes when the front door is ripped open, ready to move in any direction. A woman screams as she's pushed through the door, blood all down her front, but even before Will's brain finishes cataloging all the ways that image is *wrong*--hair too short, too blond, body thickened by childbirth and middle age--he knows she isn't the *one*. Hobbs' defiant look, the purposeful way he slams the door between them, says it all.

He rushes to the woman's side regardless, but gods, Hobbs has done a thorough job. Her throat's been slit from ear to ear, so deep it's a wonder she even got a chance to scream, and

before he can even think about trying to stem the flow, her scrabbling hands go limp and her face goes lax.

He's on autopilot, barely thinking as he kicks in the door, though some far-distant part of him finds the action deeply ironic. "Garret Jacob Hobbs?" he calls as he pulls his gun, edging further into the house. "FBI!"

There's a commotion further in, another voice raised in distress: lighter, younger, feminine. He rounds the corner on the kitchen and finds Hobbs standing with his daughter pulled back into his chest. For a moment, it almost looks like he's embracing her, protecting her.

"*No, no*," she's pleading, so scared she can barely get the words out, most of them hopelessly garbled. Hobbs meets Will's eyes for a heartbeat, a breath, and then he squeezes them closed again on a sob.

No. No.

The cut is sloppy, barely planned, just one desperate stroke that can't be undone. Hobbs' arm arcs wide, pulling him far enough away from his daughter to give Will room to pull the trigger. The first bullet catches Hobbs in the shoulder, knocking him further back, but it's not enough to stop him; when he shifts his grip on the knife to follow his daughter down and finish the job, Will shoots twice more, three times, and then he just doesn't stop until Hobbs fetches up against the counters and slides bonelessly to the floor.

The girl. *The girl, the girl, the girl*.

He all but falls to the floor, barely remembering to fumble his gun back into its holster instead of dropping it. A bright lake of blood is already spreading across the floor beside the girl's head, more spurting in forceful bursts from the cut in her neck. "No," Will breathes as he tries to stop the flow. His hands are shaking. No. *He* is shaking. "No." He can't get it to *stop*.

Glassy blue eyes--*wrong, wrong, he'd known all along the others were wrong, close but not so close as to tempt him to actually* do *it*--flick away from his to catch on something beyond his shoulder. The soft tap of a dress shoe on tile reminds Will he's not alone.

"D-doctor," he says on a wave of relief, more than ready to hand this disaster over to someone who knows what they're doing. Lecter doesn't move. Tossing a harried glance over his shoulder that doesn't quite connect, he tries again. "She needs help. I don't--"

"I can't."

Will's fingers press tighter at the edges of the wound as he whips around as best he can, one knee slipping on a streak of red. "You *can't*?" he echoes incredulously, fury climbing up his ribs. "You were a doctor! You said you could fucking control yourself!"

"It's not that simple," Lecter insists. His eyes are fixed on Will's hands, but he doesn't look hungry; he looks disturbed, like Will's request is somehow improper.

"Is this an Other thing?" Will demands, teeth bared. "Do you *need* something from me? Because I'll do it. Whatever it is."

Lecter's eyes snap to his, and he's--*troubled, everything's off-kilter now, and he's never, ever thought to be asked for this...but*. "You'd be--"

"I don't care, just *help her*."

Lecter's expression firms, but instead of walking away, he closes the distance between them and sinks to one knee on the girl's other side. There's a tiny hesitation before his hands replace Will's around the girl's neck, but his touch is sure. "Hello, Miss Hobbs," he says, ignoring Will in favor of meeting the girl's terrified eyes. His own eyes are grave, but his faint smile makes a good attempt at reassurance. "Please don't try to talk or move your head, but I must ask. Do you consent to bearing living witness to the bond between myself and Will Graham? Lift a finger, please, if you agree."

Will stares, wondering belatedly if he's signed away his soul, because that's an awfully formal way of saying he'll collect on Will's promise later. How much later? The cynical part of him says two weeks.

The girl tries to nod out of habit, but Lecter's hands hold her still. The finger she lifts shakes uncontrollably, but it must be good enough.

"Thank you, Miss Hobbs," Lecter murmurs. For a moment he almost looks like he's in shock himself, but he takes a deep breath and lets it out slow. "I'm afraid I have no talent for healing to make this easier for you, but I was a surgeon for a number of years. You're in good hands."

Will nearly lets a bark of hysterical laughter bubble to the surface. Was that a pun? Does Lecter ever *stop*? He must give himself away somehow, because Lecter glances at him again: weighing, thoughtful. Something settles behind rust-brown eyes, but Will's too scattered to determine what.

"An ambulance, Will," Lecter prompts without urgency, keeping calm for his patient. He's unsettlingly good at that. "If you would."

He would. Absolutely.

He only drops his phone twice before he manages to connect the call.

Chapter End Notes

So is this a good time to point out that the file name for this one is "eldritchmarried?" I feel like this is a good time to point out that the file name for this one is "eldritchmarried." XD

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will takes the time to get cleaned up before heading to the hospital where the Hobbs girl--Abigail--is being treated. It's unlikely they'd have let him through the doors otherwise, but it has the added benefit of giving him a chance to get his head on straight before confronting Lecter again.

That unexpected near-failure of the Hippocratic Oath, that strange demand that Abigail stand witness to their poorly-negotiated deal: he wants answers for these, which he'd failed to get at the scene. There hadn't been time. A neighbor had already called in the attack on Louise Hobbs, and while not usually one to panic in a crisis, Will's head had been so full of a borrowed love for his phantasmal daughter, he'd been reduced to encouraging her laboring breaths with his own when the EMTs arrived just minutes later. Lecter had spared him a brief, comforting touch on the shoulder, but then he was gone, glued to Abigail's side with a watchful air that didn't jibe at all with his hesitation of before.

None of it adds up. The more he wracks his brain, the more certain he is that it's a cultural thing, but where it doesn't pertain to the Compact, Will's knowledge of Other customs could fill a teacup. It's not something he's ever needed to know; the Bureau has its consultants, its own small collection of recruits, but Others largely police themselves, and their notions of what constitutes an intraspecies crime frankly make his head hurt.

He can guess all he wants, but the only way he's going to get any real answers is to ask Lecter directly.

He'd call the man, arrange a meeting, but he doesn't have Lecter's number. Jack probably does, but that would open the door on a conversation he wants to avoid as long as possible. He knows he jumped the gun with Hobbs, and it's not much comfort to know he was right. He avoids contacting Alana for much the same reason; he's not the only one vindicated by how things turned out, and he knows she'll drag the embarrassing story of his minor breakdown out of him somehow.

It doesn't matter, he decides. Lecter will get in contact with him sooner or later, if only to collect what he's owed. In the meantime he can at least visit the girl, make sure she wasn't hurt any further by their mistakes.

When he asks at the front desk for Abigail's room number, he expects to have to flash his badge, but they only ask for his ID. "You're, um...you're on the list?" the medical assistant who signs him in says, frowning uncertainly like she thinks she's being tested. Funny; Will feels a little like that himself.

It's not hard to find the right place. Abigail has a private room, which might be due to her status as both family and victim of the Shrike, but Will suspects there's an easier explanation.

When he lets himself into the room--no guards on the door, which stands wide open--the first thing he sees is the frail body dwarfed by a medical bed, a nest of wires and tubes snaking away from her sleeping form. She's porcelain pale despite the blood being fed back into her veins, and there's a lack of *presence* behind her closed lids that Will only sees in the comatose and--if he's lucky--the dead.

Then he takes another step, lets his eyes drift just a little further, and sees the large hand clasping hers, the arm outstretched but lax in sleep, Dr. Lecter's uncomfortable-looking slump in the chair at her side. Barring Abigail's father, Lecter is the last man Will expects to find at her bedside, but there he is, offering comfort even though she's not awake enough to feel it. His cuffs are still red with her blood, but otherwise you'd never know he'd held a life in his hands just hours before.

Will is barely two steps over the threshold when Lecter comes awake, fully alert from the moment he opens his eyes. Lifting his head sharply, he stares blankly at Will for half a beat before wariness is replaced by warmth in the space of a blink. "Will," he says, keeping his voice down as if afraid to wake the girl on his left. He doesn't let go of her hand. "Good to see you looking better. Did you have any trouble finding us?"

"No, they directed me right to you," Will says, rocking back on his heels. There's a second chair on the other side of the bed, but he's not sure he won't heave himself out of it the minute he sits. Moving helps him think. "Which is strange, since I'm obviously not here on official business, but...apparently I'm on a list?"

"Yes, I made sure they understood your rights were on par with mine."

Will frowns. His *rights*? "I'm confused."

Lecter looks tempted to echo that statement but nods slowly instead. "I'm not surprised. Tell me...how aware are you of the tensions that exist between the various broods?"

He's a little thrown by what seems like a change in subject but willing enough to play along. "Well...I know a Formless would as soon spit on a Shoggoth as look at one," Will offers thoughtfully, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Even though they're roughly the same model. And the Shan and the Mi-go have a pretty bitter rivalry over tithes, since they both have a preference for the same organs."

Lecter inclines his head, pleased with Will's understanding. "And then there's the Thousand: pack hunters, but only until the first sign of weakness. You'd think that tendency to test each other to destruction would interfere with the taking of a mate, but we manage. Have you ever wondered how?"

Will arches his brows, puzzled. "I guess I just assumed you made the same benefit assessment as a human. If you're both getting enough out of the partnership, you stay. Most of the time the payoff is affection, but...safety, security, stability...there's any number of reasons people stick together."

"Astute," Lecter agrees, "with one minor addition. Tradition dictates a token...a display, if you will, of commitment to the relationship. Nothing so frivolous as a ring."

Will's eyes go wide as he slips his hands free again. He has a bad feeling he knows what constitutes a proper token.

Lecter nods again, his shrewd eyes picking up the moment the penny drops. "When an Other chooses a mate, someone must be found to represent that bond with their life. Ideally it's someone important to both parties, because the health and happiness of the witness is a living reflection of the bond itself. I'm also told it's much easier to convince someone dear to you to forgive you for the ceremony's requirements."

"If by ceremony you mean the fact that she nearly died?" Will demands, incredulous.

"In a very specific way," Lecter explains, one corner of his mouth pulling tight. "The baring of a throat holds much more significance to one of my kind than it would to one of yours. To bathe two pairs of hands in the same life's blood and have it not result in a kill? That could never happen by accident. Mingling her blood between us was a conscious choice; the only way I could have refused was to refuse to help."

Which he tried, only Will--

Will totters over to the other chair, grabbing the back of it to lower himself down just before his knees give out.

"We're married?" he asks, though he already knows the answer. "You're saying--I forced you into some kind of shotgun wedding, or...? Wait, you were a surgeon. Did that honestly never come up? Or is that why you left?"

"I left because I killed a patient...or it felt that way at the time," Lecter says without a trace of humor, ignoring the way Will freezes as his heart thumps once, hard, against the inside of his ribs. "No, I was fortunate that there were always other doctors available the rare times such cases arose, and the emergency room staff all had strict instructions to shift those patients to another member of the staff if they could."

"And if they hadn't been able to?" Will can't resist asking, wondering how he came to be the lucky one to finally break Lecter's winning streak.

"I would have been gloved," Lecter says dismissively. "Without the sharing of blood--"

"But--there would have been gloves at the house," Will points out with a growing sense of unreality. "Kitchen or maybe bathroom. For cleaning. Right? Everybody has them." Well, maybe not everybody--it's not an *essential* expense--but a comfortably middle class family like the Hobbs? No way they didn't have a pair of yellow rubber gloves in a drawer somewhere, waiting to be used.

"Unsanitary," Lecter grimaces, even as his eyes go wide, "but...quite accurate. I...." He looks as shocked now as he did after gaining Abigail's consent, and the truth hits Will like a sledgehammer.

"That was the last thing you were expecting, wasn't it?" Will says with a lopsided smile, the absurdity of their situation catching up at last. "A near-stranger proposing to you out of the

blue and refusing to take no for an answer."

"I was...not at my best, I'm afraid," Lecter admits, still looking a bit bewildered. For someone so habitually confident, this must be one hell of a shock to his system.

Will offers up a sympathetic smile. It's not like he's never done anything ridiculous when put on the spot...and considering how little he likes social situations, that's depressingly easy to do. He's mostly glad this wasn't anything worse. "So," he says, sitting forward to brace his elbows on his knees while he searches for the least offensive way to broach the obvious. "Does getting a divorce require an equally unlikely chain of circumstances, or...?"

The bemusement fades from Lecter's face as he glances over at Abigail. His thumb glides over her knuckles once before he pulls his hand away. "Not at all. It merely requires our living witness to no longer be among the living."

Will goes still except for his hands, which lace together and clench painfully tight. "You're serious." It isn't a question, but Lecter nods anyway. "Even though I didn't know?" Lecter doesn't point out that he tried to tell him. Will had insisted, giving him carte blanche to act, and Lecter had done what he needed to do. "But--"

He's human. Only Lecter never said the tradition was specific to Other pairs. They barely know each other...only people form instant attachments all the time. He's not even gay--

And he really feels like that should have been covered under the human clause, which leaves him wondering what fresh surprises his subconscious is going to dig up next.

"Which is it that troubles you?" Lecter asks politely, sitting back in his chair. He looks relaxed, but Will's very aware of the added distance it puts between them. "That I've referred to this as a bond, or that I've said it's reserved for mates?"

"Well, now that you mention it, 'bond' does carry some heavy baggage," Will mutters, shooting for joking and falling short by a mile.

"I wouldn't trouble yourself. Our association is no more binding than a human marriage--but, unfortunately, no less."

Will frowns, sitting up himself. Is he mirroring Lecter or adding his own distance? At this point he doesn't know. "What do you mean?"

"If you were to take a human partner in marriage, it would technically be considered bigamy," Lecter explains, purely professional. "I'm sorry if that ruins any plans...."

Eyes on the floor, Will says, "No," without hesitation, flushing when he realizes how pathetic that instant admission might sound. "No plans."

"Well, plans change," Lecter reassures him with a faint smile. "In the meantime, we're not required to share a residence, much less a bed. You're free to continue your life exactly the same as before. I would only ask that you allow me to leave your name on the guardianship

papers. Should anything happen to me, it would ease my mind greatly to know that Abigail would be protected."

Will shakes his head, playing catch-up again. "Guardianship?" He'd ask if that was legal, but since Lecter is already doing it, he doesn't doubt that it is. The man seems incredibly well-versed in getting what he wants; Will's just surprised that he wants *this*.

"When she consented to being our witness, she became my responsibility," Lecter says, matter-of-fact. "You're not obligated--"

"No," Will says, leaning forward again. He feels like he needs to leap at this chance; he's fairly certain it won't be offered again. "I want to. It's not an obligation."

For the first time since Will walked into the room, Lecter's tiny smile reads as genuine.

"Thank you, Will. That's all I could ask."

Will smiles uncomfortably back. It's not exactly a tall order. Lecter's barely asking anything of him at all. Maybe that's what has him so unsettled.

People who don't ask much don't expect much, and Will would like to be the kind of person *someone* could rely on.

Even if it's just his fake husband and imaginary daughter.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh. Sorry it's so short, but I was thinking about the next bits, and no matter what I added to this chapter, it'd feel tacked-on and out of place, so...have a short chapter. D:

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will stays the night at the hospital, and no one asks him or Dr. Lecter to leave. The nurses work around them, mostly professional, though there are a few nervous smiles, incredulous stares. Lecter attracts the lion's share of the former, while Will's the lone recipient of the latter.

"Does the entire hospital know?" Will asks around dawn as a flustered nurse hustles quickly out the door. She'd barely glanced at Lecter, but she'd stared covertly at Will, checking him over for...signs of trauma? *Tentacle burns?* He has no idea, but he's insulted anyway, and not just on his own behalf. Does anyone really think they would have...*consummated* this supposed relationship while a young woman's life hung in the balance?

"It's possible," Lecter admits, "but it needn't go much further. You'll want to notify the Bureau's HR department of your change of legal status, but you aren't required to discuss it with your supervisor."

Will rubs tiredly at his face. "Wait...change of--am I checking off married instead of single now?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm required to report our bond to the registry," Lecter says with a wry twist to his mouth. He's holding Abigail's hand again, and he glances ruefully to her sleeping face before looking back to Will. "A small matter of ensuring I'm not claiming more than my allotted share of humans."

Will clenches his jaw. A substantial part of him--the part that doesn't gibe with how Lecter acquires his sustenance--doesn't want to sympathize, but it's hard to ignore the steady stream of inconveniences and intolerances that hem Others in. "Does it ever stop? All these little...digs."

Lecter tips his head thoughtfully to the side. "Well. We have our loathsome hungers," he says, arching a brow to invite Will to share the joke, "and you have bureaucracy. I'd say we're evenly matched."

Will chuckles softly, ducking his head. In Lecter's place, he'd probably be a lot less patient; it's a pleasant surprise. Most things about Lecter have been, not least the fact that he *has* kept things professional, their odd relationship status aside. Lecter has offered as much information as he's gleaned, cast no nets, loosed no exploratory forays into Will's mind. He's not Lecter's *job*, and if he intersects it, it's as a fellow investigator, not a research paper in the making. It's refreshing to say the least.

Exhausted mind circling belatedly back to Lecter's previous point, Will looks up curiously. "Speaking of bureaucracy...are you suggesting we hide this from Jack?"

"Not at all...although it would be amusing to see how long it takes him to catch on," Lecter admits, startling a smirk out of Will. "I am suggesting it's not his concern unless you wish to disclose it. I have no reservations on my part--"

"You don't? I mean--tying yourself to a human can't be...."

"We'd hardly be the first, nor the last."

Now that...that is a surprise. Will suddenly wonders whether Lecter's ever--but that's none of his business, just prurient curiosity, and he puts a lid on it fast.

"What about Abigail?" he asks, sitting forward again to brace his elbows on his knees, scrubbing his palms worriedly together. His eyes dart from her face to her hands, unable to settle. She still looks too pale, too defenseless with her mind buried so deeply away. "Do we have any hope of keeping this quiet for her? She's already going to be in the spotlight because of her father. Being connected to an Other--*any* Other...people are going to talk." About her diet, for one thing, and whether she'd developed a taste for fare only an Other could legally provide.

The corners of Lecter's mouth pull in with distaste. "People would have talked without my interference. But I agree she can't stay in Minnesota. Too many here will be looking for a scapegoat."

Will frowns. "You've been standing guard, haven't you."

"To some degree, yes. She'll be safer once she's transferred to Baltimore. I've already put in the paperwork, and I hope to hear this morning when she'll be stable enough to be moved."

Will sits up again, impressed but feeling a little redundant. People like Lecter--who think of everything, plan five steps ahead, and steamroll over every obstacle in their path--usually have him digging his heels in on sheer principle, but he can't really fault the man when he knows who that wrecking ball drive is acting in service of. "At least she's in good hands," he says with a wincing smile.

"Yes," Lecter says decisively, "I think she'll be quite satisfied with both her guardians. You will, of course, be able to visit whenever you'd like. Shall I email you the address of the hospital? Or would you prefer a text?"

"I'd better give you both," Will says, grateful for the distraction of digging out his phone to hide the warmth that creeps up on him at Lecter's steadfast inclusion. "Just in case. Jack may not let me go home for a while."

He's no seer, but he couldn't have made a more prophetic guess if he'd tried.

He's already close to dropping when Jack calls to tell him they've located the Hobbs' hunting cabin. When he tells Jack to pick him up from the hospital, not the motel, there's a longer beat of silence than the news really warrants, but Will's too tired to parse Jack's prickly moods into anything reasonable.

As he climbs into the passenger seat of Jack's SUV, Jack eyes him critically. "You going to be any use out there?"

"So long as I don't have to shoot anybody, sure," Will says without thinking. It shuts Jack right up, and Will stares straight ahead through the windshield, almost afraid to move, hyperaware that it was supposed to have been him and Jack out there yesterday. It should have been *Jack* who pulled the trigger, made the collar, and he's not sure which upsets Jack more or why.

"Only if there's an accomplice," Jack says after a beat too long. The idea runs so intrinsically counter to everything Will knows and feels of Hobbs that he lets it lie. Humming a vague sound to let Jack know he's been heard, he sinks down into a more comfortable spot and watches the street signs roll up to him as his eyelids grow heavy.

He sleeps the rest of the way until a sharp banging on the window his head rests against drags him from sleep by the scruff of his neck.

"We're here," Jack says flatly, superiority and displeasure radiating from him. Caught wrongfooted again, Will can't even scoff at Jack's retreating back. As far as he knows, he's still on the clock, which means Jack's right. Instead of sitting vigil, he should have forced himself to sleep, been ready to work. He keeps his mouth shut, climbs out of the vehicle, and stumbles obediently after Jack.

The cabin is small but sturdy, two floors of knotted logs joined neatly together. There's police tape across the deeply-recessed door, no lights on inside, assuming it has electricity. Likely it doesn't: a plainclothes cop standing just outside hands him and Jack each a flashlight as they enter.

Inside the cabin is cluttered but neat. There's a wood stove, oil lanterns scattered here and there, chains and hooks to lift an animal up to be skinned, butchered or bled. Next to a pair of heavy shears, the carcass of a buck lies on a table, legs curled in as if just pulled off the truck that drove it in, but Hobbs must have been pulled away before he could deal with it. It hasn't been dressed, but he doesn't think it's been stuffed, either. Hopefully someone gets it out of here soon, or it's going to start to bloat.

While Jack's still poring over Hobbs' tools, Will spots the stairs and makes his way up, the thick boards barely creaking under his weight. The top floor is more of an attic, with the roof slanting in on two sides. There's a six-foot-wide path down the center where a grown man can stand upright, but even that's a risk. The entire upper floor is festooned with antlers of every size and shape, bristling from every surface from which they could be hung.

Right in the middle, two pairs of antlers stand out, their center tines stained red to match the puddle spattered across the floor. It's not much comfort, seeing proof that his theory was correct, that the girls had been mounted before Hobbs went to work.

"Could be a permanent installation in your evil minds museum," Will says as he hears Jack come up the stairs behind him. This place is definitely giving him the creeps, and he was forewarned. The worshippers of the Black Mother use a lot of antlers in their décor, prominence given to all the spoils of the hunt. This isn't even the weirdest Will's seen, but

maybe that's the point. Hobbs' abattoir is neat, methodical, evidence of an organized mind. Whatever reason he had for killing those girls was rooted in logic, however twisted, not delusion.

"Well, what we learn about Garret Jacob Hobbs will help us catch the next one like him," Jack says, shining his own flashlight in a slow circle. "There's still seven bodies unaccounted for."

That's been nagging at him--he's seen antlers, pelts, bones, but nothing remotely human, unless you count the bloodstains--but there's a simple explanation. "Yeah, well, he *was* eating them."

"Had to be some parts he wasn't eating."

Spoken like a city boy. "Not necessarily," Will says, thinking unwillingly back to his own childhood, days when they were so poor his dad got up early to fish for their breakfast, because at least fish were free. He'd been more accustomed to trout roe than scrambled eggs, the bones going to broth, the guts used as bait for whatever would bite. They'd found a use for most every part; there's no reason to think Hobbs couldn't do the same.

Turning to face him, Jack lifts his chin in challenge. "All right, what if Hobbs wasn't eating alone? It's a lot of work. Disappearing these girls, butchering them, and then not leaving a shred of anything other than what's in this room."

"Someone he hunted with?" Will hazards a guess, not paying Jack's suspicions the attention they might have deserved if he hadn't seen Hobbs so thoroughly.

"Someone who is in a coma. Who also happened to be someone he hunted with."

Will breathes in deeply through his nose to keep from saying something he shouldn't. "Abigail Hobbs is a suspect?"

He is so fucking glad now that he'd decided to save that conversation with Jack until the paperwork was a done deal.

"We've been conducting house to house interviews at the Hobbs residence, and at this property also." Jack speaks slowly, almost warily. When Will doesn't answer--not that it's a question, and not that the sarcastic nod he gives Jack can really be counted as a reply--Jack takes a deep breath. "Hobbs spent a lot of time here. Spent a lot of time with his daughter here. She would make the ideal bait, wouldn't she?"

"Hobbs killed alone," Will insists, darting a fleeting look at Jack's face before turning pointedly back to the bloodstain at the foot of gore-tipped antlers. It's mostly for distraction, but when he trains his small flashlight on the dusty boards, a metallic sheen glinting off a delicate, twisting filament catches his eye.

Reaching carefully past the sharp tines of yet another set of antlers, he tweezes a curling, red hair between two gloved fingers and holds it up to the light.

"Someone else was here," he says, refusing to look up when Jack looms over him to investigate. The hair isn't a match for Abigail or any of the other girls, nor for Hobbs' wife either. This is someone new. Not an accomplice; Will knows he's right about that. But if Jack wants to think there is, Will's willing to sacrifice this mystery redhead as a diversion.

It's probably a misuse of his position--scratch that, it definitely is--but he needs to warn Lecter that the families of the missing girls aren't the only ones looking for a scapegoat.

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He's out for a week after the search of the cabin, HR finally noticing that he's been reporting his time in the field when he goes in to fill out the paperwork for a qualifying life event. Apparently he should've been on post-incident leave from the moment shots were fired; he gets a stock email listing all the benefits available to him and strict orders to go home, and leaves with the dubious comfort of knowing his change of marital status probably slipped right under the radar.

He doesn't actually *want* time off--it gives him too much time to think--but having the extra time to sit with Abigail is a blessing in disguise.

She's in a private room, of course. Will's done being surprised at the expense Lecter is willing to go to for the things that are important to him. They meet sometimes when one of them lingers too long--Will thinks of it as a changing of the guard--but their conversations are more informative than personal. Lecter assures him that lawyers are waiting on retainer, discusses Abigail's care and when the coma induced to allow her to heal without further stress might be lifted. He brings coffee, sometimes food. Both are delicious.

He won't go so far as to say meeting with Lecter is the highlight of his day, but he can't deny that being in Lecter's company is unexpectedly comfortable. They have the same goals, if nothing else.

It doesn't hurt that the man's one hell of a chef.

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His first class after his return is exactly as awkward as he expects it to be, but he doesn't quite feel like fleeing until Alana corners him afterwards, asks how he's doing, and then immediately follows with, "I didn't want you to be ambushed...."

"This is an ambush?"

"Ambush is later," Alana tries to explain, tense and unhappy with something already. "Immediately later. Soon to now. When Jack arrives, consider yourself ambushed."

"Here's Jack," Will says, standing away from the desk he'd been perching on to circle behind it, satchel in hand. It gives him an excuse to avoid Jack's narrowed eyes.

"How was class?" Jack asks, giving Alana a warning look she ignores with a bland stare.

"They applauded," Will grumbles. "It was inappropriate."

"Well, the review board would beg to differ," Jack says as Will starts putting his notes and laptop away. "You're up for a commendation."

Fantastic. Nightmares and a pat on the back.

"And they've okayed active return to the field."

"The question is," Alana interjects while Will's still digesting that, "do you want to go back to the field?"

Does he? He'd been told in no uncertain terms that it's the last place he belongs. He almost feels like he's bribed his way there with Hobbs' body.

"I want him back in the field," Jack tells Alana, biting each word off deliberately. "And I've told the board I'm recommending a psych eval."

"Ah," Will says under his breath, looking back to Alana. Suddenly her presence makes a lot more sense. "Are we starting now?"

Her eyes widen, brows lifting in genuine surprise. "Oh, the session wouldn't be with me."

"Hannibal Lecter's a better fit," Jack cuts in. "Your relationship's not personal."

Will doesn't even open his mouth, though he wants to. It's been over a week; it's a good thing he didn't place any bets on Jack finding out, because Lecter would have won.

"But if you are more comfortable with Dr. Bloom--"

"No, I'm not going to be comfortable with anybody inside my head," Will all but snarls. Jack nods as if he expected that answer and intends to fight it, but Alana takes a deep breath, expression placating.

"You've never killed anyone before, Will. It's a deadly force encounter. It's a lot to digest."

"I used to work Homicide," he reminds them both on his way to the door.

"The reason you currently *used* to work Homicide is because you didn't have the stomach for pulling the trigger," Jack fires back. "You just pulled the trigger ten times."

There's more than just the wrath of being thwarted giving urgency to Jack's words. He actually sounds serious about this. "Wait, so a psych eval isn't a formality?"

"No, it's so I can get some sleep at night. I asked you to get close to the Hobbs thing. I need to know you didn't get too close."

Will frowns. What does that even mean? Jack had all but hounded him to think more like Hobbs, to sink into him until he could predict his next move. It had worked, so why worry now?

"How many nights did you spend in Abigail Hobbs' hospital room, Will?"

Understanding dawns. It's not Hobbs Jack thinks he got too close to. It's Hobbs' daughter.

"Therapy doesn't work on me," he warns, considering and rejecting the idea of telling Jack he has every right to be at Abigail's bedside. His last impulsive act where Abigail was concerned got them all into one hell of a mess. He's going to be more cautious this time.

"Hmm," Jack says, sarcasm thick in his tone as he stalks closer, trying again to force eye contact. "Therapy doesn't work on you because you won't let it."

"And because I know all the tricks," Will says to Jack's shoulder.

"Well perhaps you need to unlearn some tricks."

"Why not have a conversation with Hannibal?" Alana suggests, trying desperately to keep the peace between them. "He was there. He knows what you went through."

'Hannibal,' she says, the name falling naturally off her tongue. He'd almost forgotten that Alana was the one who'd suggested Lecter meet with Jack in the first place, that she'd studied under him, knew him, trusted him. It's not just his own instincts pushing him to relax around Lecter; Alana trusts him too.

Slipping his reading glasses off his nose, Will nods wordlessly to Alana and starts walking for the door again, not sparing Jack a glance.

"Come on, Will," Jack calls after him, not realizing Alana's already carried her point. "I need my beauty sleep!"

He'll talk to Lecter. He doubts very much he'll get anything out of it other than an update on Abigail's progress and maybe some excellent coffee, but they won't be able to say he hasn't tried.

As for the psych eval...maybe Lecter has some thoughts in that direction as well.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry guys, got put on a new project at work that, while utterly devoid of mental stimulation (hence why I've been able to rewatch episodes all day) is a bit more physically demanding than usual, so I've just been exhausted when I get home. Still am, actually, but I'd rather write than sleep, lol.

In other news, I kind of feel sometimes like I'm doing the equivalent of "making game mechanics sound logical" when it comes to working around certain scene jumps or dialog choices in canon, so like...if anything seems weird at times, go ahead and ask if you want, I probably did it on purpose and can tell you why. XD

Chapter 7

Dr. Lecter's office sits in an upscale part of town, sandwiched between a more modern office building on one side and a Chapel of Nodens on the other. The building itself is probably a historical landmark, and Lecter seems to have it all to himself; no other names are listed on the metal plaque outside, and when Will lets himself in, the only marked door leads to Lecter's waiting room.

Late as it is, he doesn't have long to wait. The door to the office opens only a few minutes later, Lecter appearing with a welcoming smile and a curious tilt to his head. "Will, come in. How was your first day back?"

"Equal parts uncomfortable and frustrating," Will grumbles, slipping past Lecter with a nod of greeting. "We covered the Shrike capture today in my classes. If you can call it a capture."

"I'm more inclined to question the timing. Have you even had a chance to process it yourself?"

Will shakes his head, brushing off Lecter's concern. "It was what they were all thinking about, so...rather than try to force them to learn something they didn't want to hear, I figured I could turn it into a 'teachable moment' instead."

"Did it work?" Lecter asks, leaning back against the edge of his desk as he watches Will prowl the room. It's not quite what Will would have expected from a psychiatrist's office: the one utterly stereotypical couch is offset by another in powder blue silk set against a red contrast wall that...actually does feel fairly restful, against all expectation. The art on the walls is all in black and white, complicated pieces that invite further study rather than soothing the eyes. He's pretty sure the stag sculpture cast in iron is, in fact, ironic on multiple levels.

Turning away from a ladder leading up to a small library on the mezzanine above, Will hunches a shoulder. "I won't know until they turn their papers in, but I think I've gotten more standing ovations today than the Baltimore Symphony has all season."

"Hmm. With good reason, I'm afraid," Lecter says, one corner of his mouth tipping up when Will is startled into a laugh. "Their brass section is frankly terrible. I take it you don't feel the applause is deserved?"

Will scrubs a hand over his mouth, turning half away as dull anger catches up to him again. "You know, when they told me I was too unstable to be an agent, I was willing to accept it. You don't necessarily want a guy who's going to get lost in his head every time he makes eye contact walking into volatile situations or scaring witnesses. I get that. Except now," he grates out, pacing back towards the chairs by Lecter's desk though he's too restless to sit, "I'm wondering if instability was a consideration at all, because now that I've proven I have the *guts* to pull the trigger, suddenly *everybody's* perfectly fine with having me out in the field."

"You think your earlier exclusion was based on their perception of your courage?"

"I don't know what to think," Will mutters, clenching his hands on the back of one of Lecter's twin chairs. "This sudden change of heart can't be because of my so-called 'gift.' They already knew what I could do; it's why they hired me at all."

"Knowing about a skill and seeing the benefits it can provide are two different things," Hannibal points out. "Sometimes a demonstration is required, especially if it falls outside the ordinary scope of abilities."

Will sighs. "Yeah, maybe. It might be a moot point anyway. Jack thinks I need therapy," he admits, mouth twisting in distaste. "He's recommended a psych evaluation, if by 'recommended' I mean he's made it a requirement for field work."

Lecter frowns, one forefinger tapping twice, three times against the lip of the desk before stilling. "I see. And unfortunately, in this situation my hands are tied. Were the review board to discover your evaluation was administered by your husband, you'd be pulled from the field again, at best."

"Not to mention the nasty ethics violation you'd be investigated for," Will agrees, shoulders slumping. Suddenly drained, he circles the chair to slump into it at last, rubbing tiredly at his eyes with one hand. "Mostly I was hoping you could recommend someone with an open mind for...people outside the norm, I guess. I'd ask Alana, but in order to ask Alana, I'd have to explain why the fabled Dr. Lecter isn't good enough," he explains with a wry smile to take the sting from his words, "and I'd rather this not get back to Jack just yet."

"Perfectly understandable," Lecter agrees, leaving the desk to sit across from Will in the matching chair. "He will find out eventually, you realize."

"I know. Probably the minute he finds out you didn't do my eval. I haven't exactly been subtle with how I feel about having someone poking at my brain, and he knows we at least get along."

"Well. I do tend to prefer a gentle nudge to a poke; perhaps that's worked in my favor."

"You're a breath of fresh air," Will assures him with a quiet laugh.

"And I may have the answer to your predicament," Lecter adds thoughtfully. "I have a colleague--retired, though she may make an exception in your case, as a personal favor. I can assure you, she's well-versed in navigating unusual points of view; as well as being a colleague, she's also my therapist."

Will starts, caught off guard. "You have a therapist? Sorry," he says in the next breath, "I just meant...that sounds like a house painter hiring someone else to paint his house."

"Which I'm sure you'd find me guilty of doing were that my profession," Lecter replies, nothing grudging. "I may not be able to turn off the analytical portion of my mind any more than you can curb your empathy, but I do try not to bring my work home with me. Seeing a fellow professional helps with that, and with certain stresses of the job."

"Huh. When you put it like that...." He wonders if Alana sees someone as well and feels guilty for never before considering that she might. She's always so calm, so put-together, it's hard to picture her needing any kind of help from anyone. Then again, he would have said the same of Lecter not five minutes before.

"Let me share a piece of advice," Lecter says, leaning forward with a conspiratorial air to match his tiny smile. "Never trust a chef who won't eat his own cooking."

Will laughs, shaking his head. "Thank you, Doctor. Was that one on the house?"

"Family discount," Lecter replies as he sits back again, a hint of smugness teasing at the corners of his mouth.

Time freezes for a moment as that word--family--hits Will square in the chest. It's not a concept he's had any personal connection to for as long as he can remember, but it doesn't strike him as *wrong*. Even if their relationship is only on paper, they have a shared responsibility to someone deserving of their protection. It's not that great a leap.

Afraid he's been silent too long, Will clears his throat. "So...should I ask who you're referring me to?"

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Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier is a surprise in more ways than one. Foremost is that she's agreed to meet Will in her own home, which tells him two things: first, that Lecter has somehow convinced her he's not crazy, or at least not dangerously so, and second that he should tread lightly, in case her choice of venue has more to do with agoraphobia than comfort.

It's a nice house, all modern angles and wide sheets of glass, with little in the way of shadows for anything to find a hiding place. Maybe that should have been a clue, but his second surprise is that Dr. Du Maurier is almost certainly human. He's not sure in hindsight why he expected anything else. Lecter may be uncommonly sociable, but the Thousand aren't known for suffering Others in their territory lightly.

Dr. Du Maurier greets him at the door, serious and unsmiling, but not necessarily unfriendly. Her face has the same still, unruffled cast as Lecter's, but where Lecter's betrays a certain intensity, an animal watchfulness that could flow into action without warning, Du Maurier's is as cool and polished as armor.

"Will Graham?" The measured, whiskey voice is a third surprise, but it suits her. Will gets the feeling that anything which does *not* suit her doesn't gain traction in her life for very long. "Please come in."

"Thank you for seeing me. I, ah...haven't had the best luck with psychiatrists in the past," Will admits with a nervous laugh.

"And yet you seem to have attached yourself to one permanently," Du Maurier notes, one pale brow arching as she glances up at him.

Will rubs at the back of his neck. "Did Dr. Lecter explain...?"

"He did." Her faint, faded smile is also reminiscent of Lecter, except in all the ways it isn't. From her, it's a sign of her reserve. From Lecter--*oh*.

Lecter's trying his best not to show off his teeth.

"Well," Du Maurier says into the silence as Will digests that, "I understand you've had an unpleasant experience recently. Would you care to talk about it?" she invites, holding out a hand to indicate the rest of the house.

Will takes a deep breath. "Honestly I'd rather just forget it and move past it, but that's not why I'm here, is it?"

"No. But moving past it would be the goal regardless. Perhaps this interview will help you to do that in time."

Maybe. Maybe he just needs to get it off his chest. It's just hard to open up when he feels like a lab rat running a maze he can only see the walls of, with no clue what the researchers watching him run are making of his choices.

Not for the first time, he wishes they'd been just a little bit early to the Hobbs' place. He'd really rather have this conversation with Lecter if it has to be had at all.

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It goes pretty well, he thinks. He gives his account of the incident, glossing over the part at the end where he got himself hitched through dumb luck and an embarrassing lack of cross-cultural awareness. He talks about his nightmares, but only the ones where they don't arrive fast enough or where he writes off the missing address on Hobbs' paperwork as an oversight.

He doesn't recount the one where Hobbs' bullet-riddled corpse took the place of his target on the shooting range. Nor does he bring up the feathered stag that's followed him nightly from one dream to the next. He's well aware of where it comes from, that Lecter's tithe had left a mark less gruesome but just as deep as Hobbs' death. He just doesn't want his 'marital' problems diagnosed with the rest of his issues where the review board can see.

"Well, Mr. Graham," Dr. 'you may call me Bedelia' Du Maurier says at the end of the hour. "While I would recommend you give therapy another chance, I won't prescribe it in my evaluation."

"Thank you," he says, pleased but not entirely surprised. He's had the distinct feeling through most of the interview that Bedelia is going easy on him, and he wonders if that was part of the favor Lecter requested. Maybe that ought to worry him, but mostly he's relieved. He already knows how his mind works, the traps it likes to lay and how to get around them. He doesn't need someone else barging in thinking they can manage his brain better than he can. "So...what's the next step? Is there anything else I need to do, or...?"

"Now I write a letter, where I tell them enough to assure them I've been thorough yet far too little to worry them," she explains dryly, one corner of her mouth tugging up. "I'll have it couriered over, and if the board requires nothing further of either of us, you should be cleared for fieldwork shortly thereafter."

Will nods, forcing a smile. He hadn't really thought she'd let him take the report with him, though the cautious side of him would dearly love to know what she plans to write. That would entirely defeat the point of having an independent examiner, of course; he's honestly surprised the board didn't insist on using one of their own preferred psychiatrists, but Jack must have pulled some strings.

"I see. Well. Thank you for your time, Dr. Du Maurier. You've been very helpful."

"It was my pleasure," she says with a private little smile. He doesn't doubt she's sincere, but what she has to be so pleased about, he can only guess at.

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He's on the firing range when Jack sends for him next. He just hopes that doesn't turn out to be an omen.

Elk Neck State Forest is a mere two and a half hours from work, so Will drives himself, following the forensics team out of the parking lot, though he loses sight of them after a few miles. He hasn't ridden with them yet, but Price was kind enough to warn him that Beverly's got a lead foot, so he doesn't even try to keep up. It's not a race; where they're heading, no one's going anywhere fast.

It's a peaceful drive, all things considered. He pops a few aspirin as he settles into the monotony of the interstate, hoping to keep the dull throb behind his eyes from condensing into something worse. It's barely been a day since he was given the okay to return to field work, and he doesn't need his mind dulled by yet another headache.

Spotting the first sign for the Elk Neck exit, he shakes off the fog and sits up straighter behind the wheel. They haven't quite hit the trophy hunting seasons yet, so the roads are fairly quiet, the blustery fall weather deterring a lot of the casual campers and hikers. He barely sees any cars in either direction until he turns onto a pitted dirt road that leads to a police blockade.

The road he's shown is badly overgrown, pitted with deep holes filled with muddy water. He drives cautiously, unsurprised when he spots the small collection of cars, cruisers and coroner's vans up ahead and finds the others have beaten him here. The forensics team have already gone ahead; he imagines Zeller in particular was especially keen to get first crack at the site.

Jack's got his phone glued to his ear as Will finds a place to park, but it's obvious he's been waiting for Will to arrive.

"Will," he calls while Will's still pocketing his car keys. "I hear you got your paperwork turned in. Good."

"Well, far be it from me to deny any man his beauty sleep." He's braced for an explosion, but Jack only snorts, jerking his chin towards a line of police tape as he strides away, expecting Will to follow.

"So, Lecter gave you the all clear."

"Uh...no, actually. Dr. Du Maurier gave me the all clear," Will corrects him warily. "Dr. Lecter just pointed me in her direction."

Though he doesn't stop moving, Jack frowns, half-turning to give Will a doubtful once-over. "What happened to not being comfortable having someone in your head? And what was wrong with Lecter?"

"I never said I was comfortable with her," Will points out, scowling. "And my relationship with Dr. Lecter is...not as impersonal as you thought."

Jack's footsteps falter as his face blanks with shock. "You want to explain that to me, Will?"

Will takes a deep breath though his nose, squaring his shoulders. "No."

"No?" Jack echoes, incredulous. "Are you--"

"My personal life is personal, Jack," Will says, keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead. "You asked me for a psych eval. I brought you the one that won't invite a hearing somewhere down the line."

For once he seems to have struck Jack silent. Jack wants to ask--he's probably literally biting his own tongue right now--but they're breaking no rules, and no code of conduct applies. Lecter's a consultant, not an official FBI employee, isn't Will's doctor, and as far as Will knows, has no plans to kill and eat him out of turn. Everything they're doing is perfectly legal...except, of course, for the part where Will is keeping silent about his relationship to a person of interest, namely Abigail Hobbs. Then again, Jack hasn't asked.

Yet.

"So?" Will prompts when Jack seems in danger of remaining permanently off-track. "The report said this place was found by three kids who were *not* looking for a marijuana grow--or so they claimed. Do we know anything else?"

With another long look at him, Jack shakes his head. "Local police found some tire tracks on a hidden service road and some small animal traps in the surrounding area."

"He wanted to keep his crop undisturbed," Will muses as the... *farm* comes into view. He counts nine shallow graves--very shallow, barely deep enough to submerge their contents fully--all of them framed with cheap pine boards but no lids. The holes are neat and orderly, but there's nothing neat about their contents: all nine bodies have been transformed into grotesqueries, barely recognizable as human beneath thick rafts of mushrooms blooming from their flesh.

Jack nods, scrubbing his gloved hands together. "The only thing missing is the scarecrow."

"Okay," Price reports as he rises from his crouch in the middle of the line, "we've got nine bodies, various stages of decay, and as you can see, all very well fertilized."

"He buried them in a high-nutrient compost," Beverly adds, rising as well. "He was enthusiastically encouraging decomposition."

Zeller snaps a last photo before swiveling to face Jack. "They were buried alive with the intention of keeping them that way...I mean, for a little while."

"Long enough for the fungus to eat away any distinguishing characteristics," Price says, circling a finger at the shapeless mass that was once the nearest body's head.

"Line and rebar were used to administer intravenous fluids after they were buried," Zeller picks up the thread, tracing the path of plastic tubing along the ground and into the trees with an outstretched hand. "He was feeding them something."

No lids to their coffins, nothing between them and freedom but three inches of dirt. "No restraints?" Will asks, just to be certain.

Price and Zeller look at each other and shrug. "Just dirt," Price confirms.

"The other end of the air supply system comes up over there," Beverly says with an odd twist to her mouth. "It isn't a very considerate clean air solution, which clearly wasn't a priority, 'cause he isn't lazy."

"No, he's not," Will murmurs, shaking his head. No compassion, no *care* for his victims. Like they...they aren't even....

Jack doesn't say anything, but Price seems to get the idea first, turning to the other two. Beverly immediately starts to pick her way out of the line of graves; Zeller opens a hand as if to ask 'now?' but as the others vacate the scene, he rises to join them.

Soon it's just Will, standing alone. He breathes in, out. The dead are still lined up before him, but he can't even find their eyes. It's another pair he sees through as he winds back time, shovels the dirt back over, and then--

I do not bind his arms or legs as I bury him in a shallow grave.

Dirt flies, scoop by scoop. The man he placed in the ground doesn't move, doesn't flinch from the chill as rich loam hits his bare skin.

He's alive. But he will never be conscious again.

He kneels beside the grave, the box, the *planter*. A mouthpiece goes in. Duct tape holds it in place for now; the soil will keep it there later. A tube for air. One problem solved.

He won't know that he's dying. I don't need him to.

This man is incidental. He could be anyone. He's not the focus; he was convenient.

This is my design.

One last look to make sure everything's in its place--air, IV line, Hobbs--

Will freezes, heart losing its slow, steady pace to hammer for escape against his ribs. Gone are the mushrooms, the anonymous victim. Garret Jacob Hobbs lies in that grave, milky eyes staring up at a sky to match, blood-stained and bullet-holed and not...not *real*--

His lids weigh a thousand pounds, but he blinks and blinks again, gasping like a drowner as the vision collapses. That's...that's never happened before, and he's not sure why it's happening now, and he is not--

He is not prepared when the mushroom garden laid out before him heaves to life, one clammy hand reaching out to close around his wrist as a ragged breath rasps through a lipless mouth. For a moment the world goes horrifically sharp, the nerves along his spine singing like piano wire stretched too tight.

"Don't touch him!" somebody yells as EMTs converge from nowhere, and he can't tell for one confused second who they mean or why.

He staggers away, nearly tripping into the grave just behind him. He finds his feet, but the very ground beneath him feels unstable.

He only sees what's there to be seen.

So why is he seeing the ghost of a man he killed?

***

Standing in the forefront of the crowd of onlookers, Freddie keeps her hands demurely at her waist, angling her camera with the ease of practice as she takes shot after shot. She's barely going to have to do any work on this one; the pictures are bizarre enough that even if she didn't write one line of copy, the gallery alone would rack up an obscene number of hits. This one's going to go viral, she can feel it in her gut.

The mushrooms are what really sell it. So many associations: rot and decay and secret places underground. How to spin it, though...the weird creepiness of the fungus, or the more universal fear of being buried alive? She assumes they were alive, anyway; there's no point in making sure a dead man won't suffocate.

The whole thing is pure journalistic gold, but one thing stands out: a man in a plaid shirt and unstylish jacket, wearing a gun on his hip that looks somehow tacked on. He's not comfortable with it, but he's probably not comfortable with much; he has a skittish look to him, like a stray dog. It might be worth dangling something in front of him to see if he'll snap; if he's here with the FBI, he must know *something*. The question is: who is he, and why is Jack Crawford, the head of the BAU, playing tour guide?

She zooms, angles, takes another picture, and tucks her camera away. Putting on her most winning smile, she turns to the man on her left.

"Excuse me," she says, pitching her voice up to sound harmless, delicate.

"Mm-hmm?" He's engrossed in his notes, a local detective from the quality of his suit and his distance from the crime scene, relegated to the fringes of the case now that the FBI has stepped in.

"I'm one of the parents of the explorers who found the bodies," she says, looking up through her lashes with wide, admiring eyes. "I wanted to thank you for being so good with all the boys."

"Yeah, those boys were very brave," the detective replies, matching compliment for compliment.

"They are good boys." She gives him a moment to enjoy feeling appreciated, tipping her head a little to the side. "You're a local police detective?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Would it be an imposition to ask a few things? The boys are gonna have questions, and I just want to be as honest with them as--"

"Of course," he rushes to assure her. "Yeah."

"Can you, ah...tell me tell me what that man is doing over there by himself?" she asks, watching as the mystery man makes a slow circuit of the graves, eyes nearly rolling back as he shuts them on a deep breath.

"He's some kind of special consultant. Works for the FBI."

She hums distractedly, but now she's curious. Why does Jack Crawford need a special consultant? What makes him so special?

And what kind of headline is he going to make for her today?

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You okay?" Jack asks a few hours later, catching Will as everyone's packing up to leave. The last of the bodies have been loaded for transport, every inch of the area combed for clues, the killer's equipment indexed and dismantled for analysis. The forensics team will be putting in another long night, but once he leaves, Will doesn't expect to be called back until the bodies have been processed. He can't say he's looking forward to it; their lone survivor didn't keep the title for long, bringing the body count back up to nine.

"I'm fine," Will says, eyes on the rapidly-dwindling line of cars. "Just wasn't expecting a jump scare like that outside a theater."

"Yeah, I don't think any of us were," Jack huffs, shaking his head. He eyes Will speculatively for a long moment, but his curiosity comes without the fearful fascination of the hospital staff. "Is there going to be any problem with Dr. Lecter continuing on as a consultant?"

"Nope," Will says without hesitation. "No problem. In fact he's probably going to be my next stop from here." Not because he intends to discuss the case, although he will if it comes up. Lecter had *known* something about the Hobbs family, enough to tell him where their devotion lay. If Hobbs' ghost has somehow attached itself to him, maybe he'll know that as well.

"And you're not going to be distracted if you have to work with him?"

"You're fishing, Jack."

"I'm just making sure my team can stay focused on the task at hand," Jack protests, his tone painting him the picture of innocence. Will snorts, eyes sliding further away and briefly hanging on a familiar SUV. Beverly and Price are busy stowing the last of their gear, but Zeller has wandered closer to the edge of the police tape; he still has his camera in hand, but his eyes dart between Will and Jack with a frown.

Will swallows a sigh. If Zeller misses being Jack's go-to guy, he can have the title back. Will has never in his life been the teacher's pet, and he's not enjoying being forced into the position now.

"I'm focused," he promises. "Now if we're done here, I'm going to go consult with the consultant. Since that's what you hired him for. Right?"

Jack shoots him a flat look but waves him off; Will makes good on his escape before Jack can change his mind. He's not sure how late Lecter works, doesn't want to assume he'd be welcome in Lecter's house, in the heart of his territory, so he pulls over just before he takes the onramp and fishes his phone from his pocket. It takes a half-minute's dithering to decide on email over text; just in case Lecter's with a patient, he doesn't want to interrupt if Lecter hasn't silenced his ringer.

He isn't sure what to say or how much he wants to commit to words. What if the simplest explanation isn't that he's being haunted but that he's losing his mind? In the end he settles on: *Something's come up. Need to talk to you. Can you let me know when's a good time? Thanks*.

He doesn't have long to wait.

My last appointment tonight is at six, Lecter replies not long into Will's drive back. He's opted to text, but the insistent buzzing of Will's phone against his thigh startles him only a fraction. *Shall we meet at my office, or can I tempt you to dinner*? Will's brows shoot up at that, but almost immediately another text comes through. *I still remember your dining preferences, never fear*.

Will laughs despite himself. It's not that he ever forgets Lecter is Other, but the man defies expectation at every turn. He's brazenly, unapologetically inhuman, but in a way that makes Will comfortable with their differences. Whatever else he is, Lecter's an honest monster. Will can respect that.

Sorry, he texts back one-handed, conscientiously keeping his eyes on the road as much as possible. Now is not the best time he could have chosen for distracted driving. *Coming back from mushroom site, don't even want to look at food. Ask Jack for pics if you dare*.

He sort of hopes Lecter will. Not only would it reinforce what he told Jack, but he's surprised to find he doesn't want Lecter to think he's avoiding his table for less savory reasons.

Then again, that mushroom garden was pretty unsavory to begin with.

Ten minutes goes by before he receives the next text, and when he glances down at his screen--*Interesting*--he can almost see Lecter's expression. If he were a cat, he'd be all pricked ears and curious, batting paws. *I'll look forward to seeing you*.

Well. At least someone will.

One corner of Will's mouth twitches, tugged almost unwillingly into a smile.

Traffic is worse on the way back, though not as bad as the line of cars streaming out of the city as the exodus homeward begins. He still makes it to Lecter's office in good time, arriving just before the hour. In the waiting room, he parks himself in the chair furthest from Lecter's office, the voices beyond muffled to a dull hum. He imagines it would be different if he were to hover by the door, but he has too many problems of his own to want to eavesdrop on anyone else's.

He's prepared to give Lecter as much time as he needs to write up his notes or whatever it is he usually does between patients, but the office door opens almost as soon as the other voice disappears to the soft thump of a second door shutting: the private exit Will has used once himself. "Will," Lecter greets him with evident pleasure. "Please come in. Your message sounded urgent," he adds as he stands aside to let Will through. "Was it something to do with the case?"

"Yes and no," Will says on a heavy sigh. "I think your friend's clean bill of mental health may have been a bit premature." He'd like to give it back to her, in fact, only HR tends to frown upon them taking things out of their personnel files.

Lecter tilts his head, eyeing Will like he can read his troubles through his skin. Maybe he even can; Will hadn't really delved into what Lecter meant by his brief mention of a 'knowing' sense, but he wonders abruptly what he looks like to one of the Thousand.

He wonders if it's confirmation of his transparency when Lecter asks, "What did you see? Out in the field."

Can't you guess? he wants to ask, but the longer Lecter stares, the more concerned he looks. Will's worried too, but Lecter doesn't deserve the sharp end of his fear.

"Hobbs," he admits, eyes flicking up briefly to meet Lecter's before jerking away.

"An association?"

"No, a hallucination," he explains with a frustrated headshake. "Or a visitation--one or the other, and I'm not honestly sure which I should be hoping for at this point. I saw him lying there in someone else's grave."

Lecter's concerned look deepens, but he's surprisingly practical when he asks, "Did you tell Jack what you saw?"

"No," Will scoffs, though some part of him is...surprised--no, *grateful*--that this of all questions is what Lecter's chosen to lead with. That's not the question of a psychiatrist; it's the reasonable query of a co-conspirator preparing for damage control.

Lecter says nothing until Will's restless feet start to tug at him, pulling him away from the waiting chairs and couches to the more neutral space behind Lecter's desk, and then he shakes his head. "It's stress. Not worth reporting. You displaced the victim of another killer's crime with what could arguably be considered your victim."

"I don't consider Hobbs my victim," Will protests, almost offended at the notion. 'Victim' suggests premeditation, and the ugly truth is that Will had acted largely on panic that morning. He knows his first two shots saved Abigail Hobbs' life. He has no such certainty about any of the seven that followed.

"What do you consider him?" Lecter asks. There's no judgment, no expectation in his tone. He asks like there's no possible wrong answer, only simple curiosity at an unfamiliar concept.

He must be amazing with his patients, because Will actually thinks about the question, but the reply he comes up with isn't even remotely satisfying. He gives it anyway. "Dead."

Lecter absorbs that without censure, though something has him looking thoughtful. "Is it harder imagining the thrill somebody else feels killing, now that you've done it yourself?"

Will has to puzzle through his meaning, because no, it's easier than it's ever been to reach that headspace--but that's not what Lecter's asking. Is it harder *on* him to do it?

He wants to insist that he's fine, that nothing has changed, but his own body fights him until a helpless nod breaks free.

Lecter gives his own tiny nod of acknowledgement--sympathetic, Will thinks, and prepares to pack that surprise away to examine in detail later--but then the corners of Lecter's mouth tuck in, and he drops his eyes, looking down and away as if--

"Hey," Will says softly, gut twisting at the first sign of remorse he's seen cross Lecter's face. "That isn't your fault."

Still looking at the floor, Lecter shakes his head. "You know why I was there."

"I did. You told me. And I asked you to back off, remember?" Will keeps his tone light. He doesn't want Lecter to think he's accusing him; he's not. "You offered to take care of Hobbs and I turned you down. You're not responsible for my choices. I knew what could happen when I put on my gun that morning."

Lecter's mouth pulls to one side, dissatisfied but willing to concede. "Still. That it's troubled you to this extent...."

"Yeah, that's actually what I wanted to talk to you about," Will jumps in, eager to steer Lecter away from all consideration of blame. "Seeing Hobbs wasn't some manifestation of guilt. I don't--I don't *feel* guilty," he admits with a grimace. "I also don't see what isn't there. I read people, evidence, but there was nothing there that even remotely tied back to Hobbs."

"Except for you," Lecter says, having lifted his head to eye Will curiously once more.

"Exactly. Except for me." Leaning tiredly back against one of the room's decorative columns, Will searches for a way to ask what he needs to without sounding like he's working up to asking for a favor and decides to just bite the bullet. Bluntness has served him well with Lecter so far. "You knew something was up with the Hobbs family while we were still in the car. If Hobbs' ghost has somehow...attached itself to me, would you be able to tell? I know human souls don't generally turn into ghosts without some pretty specific interference, but...."

Lecter prowls closer but stops well outside Will's personal bubble. "To borrow a phrase...yes and no," he says in the midst of giving Will a thorough once-over. "I'm afraid my gift is both broader and less precise than yours. If it helps, I don't sense any marks of occult interference, but there's no guarantee I would."

"But...in the car. How did you...?"

Lecter nods as if expecting Will's confusion, settling back to lean against the edge of his desk, hands braced comfortably to either side. "That was something else entirely. The Hobbs family were not only devout; they'd been dedicated to my Mother's worship--whether as converts or children, I couldn't say. A mark like that has a resonance to it, difficult to describe. Like the gathering of static before a storm. I can't always tell which god they're sworn to, but if they belong to my Mother, that I would recognize."

"Handy if you want to avoid a feud, I guess," Will says, mulling over the ramifications of such an ability. He can think of more than a few cases where having Lecter or someone like him along would have prevented a lot of bloodshed just by forewarning the officers and agents with them of what to expect.

"Indeed," Lecter agrees with a small, swift smile. He sobers in the next breath, brows creasing as he rakes Will with another measuring look, as if he can see past layers of clothing and skin to what might rest in the heart of him. "As for Hobbs' ghost, were it present and manifest, I would know it for what it was, even if I'd never seen such a thing before, but first I would have to see it."

Will frowns, tucking his thumbs into his pockets as he settles his spine more comfortably against the pillar at his back. "You said you see the basic nature of a thing."

Lecter nods, tilting his head just a little to the left. "When humans are very young, everything is new to them, yes?" he says, tone pitched as if it really is a question. As if he doesn't *know*. "You have to test for yourself to discover whether something is soft or sharp, whether it represents food and safety or whether it will burn you. Through experience, you learn to recognize these qualities and apply them to things which are similar."

"Well, yes. But that's not just humans, that's...everything," Will points out, suddenly certain he's about to be corrected.

One shoulder lifts with studied casualness. "My siblings and I have never experienced that. I was slow to grow, but fairly typical of my kind when I was whelped; roughly equivalent to a five-year-old human. I had no words for what I knew, but from the moment I opened my eyes, I could tell predator from prey, and whether that predator was hungry. Whether my dinner was more likely to bite back or run."

"So you were able to hunt on the first day?" He wouldn't have *looked* human, Will knows that much, but he'd always thought the photos he'd seen of spindly-limbed, feral children with their mouths full of teeth and antlers already coming in were the age they appeared to be. It had never once occurred to him to think of them as *babies*, but it makes a horrible kind of sense. Abandoned at birth, wherever that happened to occur, if they couldn't feed themselves while keeping out of the way of their older siblings, they wouldn't survive the night.

Lecter shakes his head. "Within minutes," he corrects, relaxed and calm. Purposefully nonthreatening. "We're usually whelped in multiples; whoever opens their eyes first usually gets a free meal."

Will stares. He should probably be disgusted by that admission, but mostly what he feels is sympathy. What a terrifying way to come into a world, where your survival might hinge on seconds. "I can definitely see how you'd need to spot danger right away."

Lecter chuckles, expression softening in fond recollection. "The Lecters had quite a time with me. Just because I knew what something was, that didn't mean I always understood what it had to do with me, or why I should care. My father's typewriter seemed particularly senseless when language was cumbersome enough when spoken aloud. Clothing was a bone of

contention for months," he adds with a self-deprecating smile. "I wasn't cold, and once I perfected my human form, surely my disguise was complete."

"Well, obviously someone carried their point on that one," Will says with a grin. Lecter's dressed more formally today, in a dark blue suit with an almost invisible striping of plaid, burgundy tie still cinched tight though he's no longer on the clock. It looks natural on him, an extension of his confidence and the precision of his speech, the steadfast air of control.

"My human mother. She had a wonderful fierceness to her, but she was always very patient. As my introduction to humanity, I couldn't have asked for a better ambassador."

Will's grin gentles as the picture compiling in the back of his head comes into sharper focus. "She was the first human you met?"

"Yes. Motherhood had been denied her, and yet it blazed out of her like a beacon. It was hardly a difficult decision, following her home.

"So," Lecter says, clearing his throat and wrenching himself deliberately back on topic, "to answer your question: were I to see Hobbs' ghost, I could tell you if it were hungry, or malicious, or scared. I might have some notion of how to kill it, were it an active threat. But I see nothing in you to suggest you've been invaded, nor hooks to draw a spirit back. I believe your mind may simply have used the trappings of one stressful situation to remind you it's seen a few others recently...and perhaps request a vacation."

Budding urge to interrupt derailed by laughter, Will shakes his head. "Yeah, that'd go over really well with Jack. But...actually, you might just be on to something, there," he realizes, scrubbing a hand over his mouth as he stands away from the column at his back. "Maybe my mind *was* trying to tell me something by showing me a ghost. When I saw Hobbs, I was reading the scene," he explains at Lecter's curious look. "I was kneeling beside the most recent body, but it wasn't a body. Not yet. Maybe...subconsciously, I must have realized he was still breathing, but he *looked*...dead. Even when he reached for me."

Lecter's frown deepens. Rising from the desk, he moves closer, stopping just within reach for another thorough examination. He must be reassured by what he sees, trepidation fading to interest after a moment. "Was that why the arms were left exposed? So he could hold their hands? Feel the life leaving their bodies?"

"No, that's too esoteric for someone who took the time to bury his victims in a straight line," Will says, scrubbing his hands together as he recalls that perfectly even row. "He's more...practical."

"He was cultivating them," Lecter suggests, turning to follow him as the discomfort of memory buzzing under his skin prods Will into motion again.

He doesn't go far, just a few steps away to Lecter's desk, taking the same spot Lecter had vacated a moment before. "He was keeping them alive, feeding them intravenously."

"But your farmer let his crops die, save for the one that didn't."

"And the one that didn't died on the way to the hospital, though they weren't crops," Will points out, uncertain now whether he'd made that sufficiently clear to Jack. The unexpected waking of the ninth victim had taken precedence over...quite a lot of things. "They were the fertilizer. The fungus their bodies were covered in--that was the crop."

Leaning his forearms on the tall back of his chair, Lecter asks, "A fungus from Earth? Or Yuggoth?"

"Earth," Will assures him, ignoring the shudder that wants to prickle down his spine. He's seen what comes out of the portals that open from the dark planet. Fungus isn't the worst, but none of it is good. "This was a garden, not a nursery."

Gaze unfocused as he ponders the problem, Lecter shrugs minutely. "The structure of a fungus mirrors that of the human brain. An intricate web of connections."

"So maybe he admires their ability to connect," Will muses, "the way human minds can't."

"Yours can."

"Yep," Will says, thinking at first to go along with the joke, but while Lecter's laughing too, Will can tell he means it. "Yeah, not physically."

"Is that what your farmer is looking for?" Hannibal asks as he straightens, resting only his hands on the chair back. "Some sort of connection?"

Will arches his brows, tipping a thoughtful look up at Lecter. Their eyes meet again; he blinks, and for a fraction of a second finds himself in a dark forest again, not one hand but two on his shoulders this time. They prevent him from turning to see what's behind him, but it feels like they're holding him steady, not just holding him still.

He blinks again, rapidly, ready to apologize, but Lecter doesn't seem troubled. He can feel Lecter reeling himself in, tightening his defenses, but so methodically it reads as politeness rather than perturbation. It's a little daunting. Will never wants to pry, but he's not used to feeling welcome.

Strangely enough, with Lecter he's never felt anything else.

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Hannibal doesn't attempt to detain Will when he rises at last to leave. It's just as well; as much as Hannibal enjoys their discussions, he'd taken a call not long after Will contacted him and agreed to conduct a new patient interview. At the time, not knowing what Will needed to talk about, he'd intended to give himself an out should their conversation veer toward subjects he wasn't prepared to entertain.

All the same he finds the timing of his caller, her urgency and persistence, suspicious to say the least. He can't help wondering whether Miss Kimball's interest in him masks a much greater interest in the man who just left.

The woman standing in his waiting room is small of stature, her face obscured by a cloud of tight red curls. With her back to him, she scrambles with something in her purse, spinning to face him with a brilliant smile that has likely distracted many. It takes no effort at all to see past it.

Greed. Miss Kimball, if that is indeed her name, is an empty pit of want, all stomach and teeth, and money is the least of what she hungers for. There's a sharp twist of spite in her, an arrogance that gives her claws, but the singular thing which drives her is hard to pinpoint. She wants power for the sake of wielding it, knowledge for the delight in showing off how much she knows. He can sense no envy, no lust for revenge, no desire to prove herself to anyone. She wants, so she takes. She'd almost be fascinating for the purity of her hunger had the pursuit of it not led her to encroach on his territory.

"Miss Kimball?" he asks for formality's sake.

"Yes," she replies, slightly breathless. For a moment he wonders, amused, if she even knows what he is.

"Good evening. Please come in."

He's always curious what people expect to see when they stare around his office with such open fascination. Piles of gnawed bones, perhaps, or a bloody handprint or two for ambience. Miss Kimball looks like she's memorizing everything she sees, as if she'll have to report back on it later.

Moment by moment, his suspicions solidify into certainty.

"I've never seen a psychiatrist before," she says, eyes lit with glee that doesn't quite bleed through in her tone. "And I am unfortunately thorough, so you're one of three doctors I'm interviewing. It's more or less a bakeoff," she says with a helpless shrug, almost apologetic.

"I'm very supportive of bakeoffs," he assures her with a smile. "It's important you find someone you're comfortable with."

"I can imagine you as my therapist," she says, relief and admiration filling her eyes, "which is good. If I can't visualize opening up emotionally, I know it would be a problem."

No, she certainly hasn't ever seen a psychiatrist before; she has no idea what to expect, so her lead-in is stilted and clumsy. He imagines she's usually much smoother in her quest for information. Perhaps she's rushing because she's afraid.

"May I ask why now?"

She's tilted her head so that her cheek nearly rests on her shoulder, and she twists a little from side to side like a nervous child. She doesn't answer directly, countering with, "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions first?" Smoothing her skirt, she seats herself in one of the chairs before his desk with such innocent enthusiasm she bounces a little, her purse tucked primly in her lap. Eager, harmless, she leans forward a little as if hanging on his every word.

"Of course not," he says, idly wondering if he should be insulted by her heavy-handed attempts to appeal to him as a man rather than a monster. She doesn't seem to think much of his intelligence if this is the tack she's chosen.

She heaves a smiling sigh. "I love that you've written so much on social exclusion. Since that's why I'm here, I was wondering--"

"Are you Freddie Lounds?" he interrupts--rudely, but he finds himself tiring of the game already. Jack Crawford had mentioned the same topic of research before trying to enlist him to unlock an admittedly fascinating mind. He believes he's heard all from Miss Lounds that he needs to.

She makes a disgruntled sound, looking away as if insulted, but she doesn't refute the accusation.

"This is unethical," he informs her as she ducks her head, "even for a tabloid journalist."

"I am...I am so embarrassed," she says with real feeling, as if a show of honesty now will sway him.

He nods in understanding but drops his eyes to her hands. "I'm afraid I must ask for your bag."

She cocks her head as if she can't possibly have heard him correctly. "What?"

"Your bag. Please hand it over. I'd rather not take it from you."

She looks away again, but puzzlingly, her scent doesn't change at all. Delicate and floral, it contains no tell-tale notes of fear, as flat as her displays of emotion are vivid. She checks off so many interesting boxes--diminished fear capacity, manipulative behavior, a callous disregard for others and the sheer arrogance that led her to his door--it's almost a pity she hasn't come to him for therapy. Not that she needs his interference to reach her full potential. Unless he's very much mistaken, she already has.

Sliding the strap off her shoulder, she holds out her purse--at the full length of her arm, he notices. She may not be afraid of him, but she's not altogether unwise.

"Thank you," he says as he relieves her of it. He doesn't truly wish to dig through a lady's bag, but it's not required; when he opens the clasp, one look inside finds a small recording device resting atop her compact and coin purse, likely the very thing she was rushing to hide when he found her in his waiting room.

He lifts his eyes to her expectantly, head still tipped down.

"I was recording our conversation," she offers before he can ask.

"Our conversation? Yours and mine?"

"Yes."

"No other conversation?"

Her chin tips up defiantly. "No."

He closes her purse again but keeps hold of it. "You were very persistent about your appointment time. How did you know when Will Graham would be here?"

"I may have also recorded your session with Will Graham," she admits. It's a peculiar habit of hers: dropping morsels of honesty as if she expects them to throw a hunter off her trail.

"You didn't answer the question. How did you know?" Will Graham is not his patient--which should disappoint him, and yet he can only muster a profound satisfaction that Will hasn't become Bedelia's either. The fact remains that they have no set schedule; he himself hadn't known to expect Will tonight. For Miss Lounds to have been here at the same time as Will, either she somehow managed to intercept their texts, or Will said something unguarded around someone who spoke out of turn.

"I can't answer that question," Miss Lounds insists.

He doesn't need her to invoke journalistic immunity. She's already answered him. It's tempting to force the particulars out of her, but he doesn't doubt he could find the culprit easily enough on his own, and he has no intention of handing her any ammunition that might spark an investigation by the registry.

He lets the silence stretch past the point of discomfort, then turns abruptly away. "Come," he says in a pleasant tone, caging a smile as her bravado turns to confusion. "Sit by me," he invites, patting the place beside him as he takes a seat on the antique couch by the wall.

She hesitates, but in the end comes cautiously over, perching as far from him as she can manage. He has to lean over a bit to hand her the recording device he fetches from her purse, getting a stronger whiff of her perfume: hyacinth, lily, calamus. A distinctive blend, easy enough to remember.

"Delete the conversations you recorded," he orders, though he keeps his tone polite. "Doctor-patient confidentiality works both ways." She hesitates, weighing her options. He doesn't doubt she could recreate her recording from memory, but without proof to back her articles and dodge any lawsuits, her ability to print with impunity is limited. "Delete it, please."

She obeys grudgingly, not looking at him as she hands the device back. He drops it back into her purse, closes it up, and then sets it neatly aside, well out of her reach.

"You've been terribly rude, Miss Lounds," he informs her, watching her expression slowly change from resentment to the first vague stirrings of fear, eclipsed almost entirely by disbelief. Adding narcissist to his profile, he wonders if he'll require the blunt force instrument of the tithe to silence her properly after all.

When she doesn't break, doesn't bolt, he nearly smiles.

"What's to be done about that?"

Chapter End Notes

Fungi (not) From Yuggoth! Yeah, I went there. XD

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The BAU's lab always runs cold, and the ventilation is to-notch, but the place still smells like a compost heap when Will looks in the next morning. Hard as they've tried to contain it all, dirt still clings between growths jostling for space, the musty smell of fungus mingling with the meatier notes of decomposition. It takes him a moment to get used to the scent, and he stays well back as he watches the others at work. He hasn't gloved up anyway, but more than that, some primal part of him doesn't want to get too close in case he wakes one up again.

Not what happened, he tells himself firmly. The superstitious savage that lives in his DNA doesn't care.

"What were they soaked in?" he asks, eyeing the body Price and Zeller are working on now. From the length of the hair, he'll assume it's a woman. Her arms lie lax at her sides, one palm turned down, the other up. Her fingernails are surprisingly clean, and her wrists show no ligature marks, no sign of bruising. His thoughts keep circling back to that, over and over. How had their killer kept them in place?

Zeller turns to answer him, but Price jumps in before he gets the chance.

"A highly concentrated mixture of hardwoods, shredded newspaper, and pig poop. Perfect for growing mushrooms and other fungi."

"It was *not* the mushrooms, though," Zeller adds, holding up a warning finger. "They all died of kidney failure."

"Dextrose in all the catheters," Beverly confirms as she joins them, holding out a sheaf of paperwork to Zeller, who trades off with Price the file he's been flipping through. "He probably used some kind of dialysis or peristaltic to pump fluids after their circulatory systems broke down."

"Force feeding them sugar water?" Will asks as he goes to fetch his coffee off the other examination table. The techs moving around the second body don't even glance at him or his cup; he tries distractedly to remember whether the table was already in use when he set it down in the first place but comes up blank.

"You know who loves sugar water?" Price says brightly. "Mushrooms. They crave it."

Zeller shrugs. "Recovering alcoholics. They crave sugar." He turns suddenly to Price with an embarrassed grimace, saying, "Don't take that personally buddy."

"Oh, I'm not recovering."

"Feed sugar to the fungus in your body," Zeller forges on, "the fungus creates alcohol, so it's...it's like friends helping friends, really."

Zeller grins, pleased with the dots he's connected, but it doesn't quite add up. Will knows more than he'd like to about alcoholic stupors, had seen his old man passed out more times than he cared to count, so far under he'd wondered more than once if he'd still have a father at all in the morning. It never lasted, though, not long enough to grow a bumper crop of mushrooms or to sleep through being buried alive.

"It's not just alcoholics who have compromised endocrine systems," he reminds them, coming back for a closer look. "They all died of kidney failure?"

A round of nods all around.

"Death by diabetic ketoacidosis."

Beverly cocks her head, turning to Zeller. "Did you know they were diabetics?"

"Uh, we *don't* know they were diabetics--"

"No, they're all diabetics," Will insists, cutting Zeller off. "He induces a coma and puts them in the ground."

"How is he inducing diabetic comas?" Beverly asks, skeptical but willing to be convinced.

"Changes their medication. So he's a doctor, or a pharmacist, or he works somewhere in medical services," he says, counting off the options one by one on his fingers.

"He buries them," Beverly talks herself through it, "feeds them sugar to keep them alive long enough for the circulatory systems to soak it up."

"So he can feed the mushrooms!" Price looks far too happy at the prospect, but that, Will's learning, is just how Price is.

Zeller works his jaw, staring at the body on the table. Will almost expects him to argue for the sake of arguing, but his grim expression never tightens into hostility. "We dug up his mushroom garden."

"Yeah, he's going to want to grow a new one," Will says heavily. That's what you do when you lose a harvest, right?

You replant.

***

Things move swiftly after that. Financial records are pulled, and it's an easy scroll down the list of transactions to find the same store popping up again and again. When a recent divorcee joins the ranks of missing persons, one question to her ex-husband is all it takes to point the police's scrutiny elsewhere.

"She's the chain's tenth diabetic customer to disappear after filling a prescription for insulin," Jack fills him in as Will follows him through the loading dock of a wholesale grocer. Dark-uniformed agents stream past them as the response team gets into position, rifles at the ready, the store's employees hanging back in tight knots. "Second to disappear from this exact location."

"And the other eight?"

"All over the county. One pharmacist all over the county as well."

"Floater, huh?" Will asks, grimacing as he tries not to make eye contact with the terrified people they sweep past.

"Floater's floating right here," Jack growls. "Still logged into his work station."

As they approach the pharmacy counter, Jack pulls out his ID and holds it high in the air. "Everyone please stop what you are doing," he orders, voice pitched to carry. He's got the lungs for it, aggression bleeding into every word. "Put your hands in the air!"

Everyone freezes, raw confusion staring back. Will doesn't envy their killer's coworkers for the revelation they're about to receive.

"Special Agent Jack Crawford," Jack introduces himself, eyes hard as he scans the nervous pharmacy techs, their flustered manager. "Which one of you is Eldon Stammets?"

"Wh--" the manager starts, glancing to his right. "Eldon was just here," he says helplessly, trying to shrug with his hands still upraised. "Just now."

"Is his car still in the parking lot?" Will asks.

"His car," Jack barks as several techs half-turn to glance out the drive-through window.

"Em-employee parking is just past the loading dock," the manager stutters out. "He's got the black--"

"Blue," someone else pipes up.

Will pays just enough attention to the brief debate that follows before taking off at a jog. They'd just come through the loading dock themselves. It's doubtful Stammets could have slipped past, so they won't catch him that way, but if he hasn't found a new site yet--if he's done what Will thinks he has--then every second counts.

When he spots the vehicle they're looking for, he feels sick. They *passed* that car on the way in. "Give me your baton," he says, holding out his hand; one of the agents who followed him hands it off without question, the others spreading out in a defensive formation as Will shatters the glass on the driver's side door. He's dimly aware they're ready to cover him if Stammets should jump out like a flushed hare, but he reaches through the shattered window to pop the trunk without even checking the seats.

As he scrambles around to the back of the car and the lifted trunk, the smell hits him like slamming face-first into a brick wall. Fresh dirt and fertilizer, too faint for them to notice while the trunk was shut tight, though he doesn't doubt that if Lecter had been with them, he'd have stopped immediately to investigate. The plastic muzzle of a breathing mask juts out of the loose soil filling the trunk, and Will doesn't have to dig very deep before his fingers find flesh--cool but not stiff, a weak pulse fluttering beneath his fingers as he presses them into the woman's neck.

"She's alive!" he yells over his shoulder as Jack comes charging up to join him.

"EMTs!" Jack bellows between choking coughs as the smell hits him too. "Now!"

As the medical crew step in and take over, Will stumbles back out of the way, clapping his hands together to brush off the dirt. He has no idea whether there's anything that can be done for Stammets' latest victim, but they can at least make sure it's his last.

"All right," Jack says between deep lungfuls of fresh air. "We know his name, we have his address, we have his car."

Will nods, already wondering how quickly they can get Stammets' face splashed across the news, when Price jogs up in a hurry.

"Jack. We just checked the browser history at Stammets' work station."

"Am I gonna wanna hear this?"

Price shakes his head. "No. And yes, but mostly no."

Beverly's on Stammets' computer when they retrace their steps, anger pouring off her in waves. Zeller watches her from the corner of his eye, turned partly away. "Freddie Lounds," he grumbles in disgust as Jack stalks up; he sounds deeply unsurprised.

"Tattlecrime.com," Jack all but snarls.

Frowning as she pulls up a page, Beverly reads aloud: "'The FBI isn't just hunting psychopaths, they're headhunting them too, offering competitive pay and benefits in the hopes of using one demented mind....'" Her voice breaks as rage and mortification collide.

"Keep going," Jack urges, though he can see the article for himself. So can Will. That's...a really very unflattering picture of him; he looks like he's about to hack his way through a bathroom door and call himself Johnny.

Beverly shakes her head, hesitating before looking his way. "It's about Will."

"Go on," Jack presses, voice hardening.

Beverly works her jaw, but Jack is Jack. Taking a deep breath, she reads: "'One demented mind to catch....' She goes into a lot of detail," Beverly cuts herself off, flicking her hand at the screen.

Jack breathes a frustrated sigh, slumping onto his elbows on the pharmacy counter. "Son of a bitch," he snaps, pounding both fists down as he straightens. "I want to know who she talked to and everything they said. If Stammets gets away...."

Will doesn't hear the rest. He's tried so hard not to attract this kind of notice--always the weird kid, always able to picture a little *too* clearly what it would feel like to get a little of his own back, and just how to get away with it. Not that he ever has, or would, but it suddenly feels like every eye in the store is trained on his back. He doesn't know where to look, and apparently neither does anybody else, though if Zeller doesn't stop *not*-looking at him like a scolded dog--

Fuck.

Zeller.

At least he knows now where Freddie got some of her information.

Turning her back to Jack, Beverly mouths 'sorry' with a sympathetic grimace. Will nods jerkily. It's not her fault. He looks to the exits, wondering if Jack still needs him there, but he's not about to ask if he can go. He's not going to let Freddie fucking Lounds drive him away from the place he's made his own. He's weathered erroneous opinions before. This won't be the time that conquers him either.

***

Setting aside his pen with the vague satisfaction of a task well-completed, Hannibal closes the last book of patient notes for the day and adds it to the top of the stack. There's a certain small challenge in committing his notes to bound volumes, where pages can neither be lost nor excised without being noticed. It forces him to take the long view, to consider his words not just as he writes them but how they might be construed later--even much later--should they be requested as evidence.

Sitting back in his chair, he rolls his head until his neck pops softly. He's starting to feel stifled in the confines of his human suit; perhaps it's time to consider a proper hunt. Somewhere further afield. Baltimore is his, but he prefers to keep his true nature out of the public eye. They know what he is, of course, can imagine quite clearly what lies beneath the surface, but they've never *seen*. The unknown terror is always more effective for what the mind brings to the table.

He taps a finger on the chair arm as he considers and rejects previous haunts. Somewhere new, where he won't have the advantage of familiarity. Somewhere quiet, peaceful, without so many curious eyes. Where the only ones there are looking for a solitude of their own.

His tapping finger stills.

He's never visited Wolf Trap. He wonders if he should start.

Shelving that notion for another time, he reaches for his tablet, intending to do one last check for the night to be certain Miss Lounds has taken his warning to heart. Finding Will's face

plastered across her website is an unpleasant surprise.

He skims the article quickly, but finding no mention of what she learned while listening at keyholes doesn't mollify him like it should. She's only just skirted the terms he set for her, like a child pulling a cat's tail, believing it won't be scratched. Convinced a mere scolding will deter the cat.

Flipping the cover of his tablet closed, he shakes his head slowly. "You are naughty, Miss Lounds."

That will need to be attended to. He may not have chosen Will Graham, but he can't say he's displeased with their connection. Will's mind is captivating, his ease in Hannibal's presence an unlooked-for delight. Tradition dictates he protect his mate and their witness, but he finds himself unaccountably impressed with the man who shouted and snarled his way into Hannibal's life. It's no hardship to continue this paper marriage; he looks forward to seeing the ripples that will spread from that unexpected development.

One such ripple seems eager to dash herself upon the rocks, but Hannibal sets aside that problem for now. Miss Lounds will keep.

He suspects another, more pressing issue will not.

***

This isn't the first time someone's kicked down Freddie's door, though the FBI--*that's* a first. The other motel guests will be shooting her dirty looks tomorrow if they happen to run into each other, to say nothing of the manager. At least the maintenance guy won't be any trouble; he's been looking for reasons to come by her unit all week, though he always leaves wanting. Guys like him are easy to manage; send them off hungry, and they're always back for more.

She doesn't fight when they throw her down on the bed and zip-tie her hands behind her before hauling her upright again. If they're looking for a struggle, they won't get one. She's impressed to see Jack Crawford himself stroll in; apparently his special consultant is very special indeed. She's a little more surprised to see a familiar face: Brian Zeller, no longer the favorite and bitter about it. She wonders if he's confessed to Crawford yet, but more likely he's here to see if she will.

It's tempting: she could spill the beans right here in front of his boss and a handful of random agents who have no reason to keep their mouths shut about it. She could, but he might be more useful later, and now he *owes* her.

"I appreciate the pageantry, Agent Crawford," she says before he can make a play for the upper hand, "but you can't arrest me for writing an article."

"You entered a federal crime scene without permission."

"Escorted by a detective," she counters, warming to the game. She knows her rights down to the letter. Does he really think he's going to beat her at this?

"Under false pretense!"

She fights not to grin. He's already raising his voice; she had no idea the head of the BAU was so easy to steer.

"It's as good as permission."

"You lied to a police officer," he tries, reining himself in when he doesn't get the response he wants.

"You can't arrest me for lying." She's starting to wonder if she'll be stuck stating the obvious in small words for the rest of the night.

He eyes her for a long moment before looking away, sucking his teeth as he considers his next phrasing. "You got all that information from a local detective?"

Prudence wins again, though it's a struggle. That doesn't mean she can't get a jab in here and there. She tosses her hair back, tipping her chin up defiantly. "Lots of talk about your man Graham. Not to mention the rivalry of who gets the collar. A local police detective looking for a pissing contest with the FBI might have some insight," she says with a careless shrug.

She glances deliberately at Zeller, but only for long enough to seem like she's reading the room for sympathy. His ears must be burning, but it doesn't show, just a slow-burning anger she wants to roll her eyes at. He'd been happy enough to trash talk Graham earlier. All she did was lend a willing ear.

"And evidently did," Crawford grumbles.

She smirks. "Sure did."

Crawford pulls a hand from his pocket, and it takes a moment to realize he's holding a pair of tweezers though he shakes them at her like an admonishing finger. "You know, the unfortunate timing of your article allowed a murderer to escape," he says, leaning in and over her as his voice drops threateningly.

She scoffs, face twisting in confusion. How is their incompetence her fault? If she'd written about the FBI arriving at a certain time at a certain place to take someone into custody, she's pretty sure she'd remember it. Maybe Graham got spotted, but if he's just going to stroll out into the open where every serial killer in Maryland can see him, what does that have to do with--

She gasps as Crawford reaches out suddenly and plucks a hair right from her scalp, irritation and outrage widening her eyes. Was that assault? *Theft*? It's physical evidence for sure, and she wants to know exactly what he means to do with it, right now, because this changes all the rules.

"You were in Minnesota," he says quietly, bending down to look her straight in the eye. *Oh*. When he said 'federal crime scene,' she'd thought-- "You were in the Shrike's nest. You know how I know? 'Cause you left one of these hairs behind," he informs her, still shaking those

fucking tweezers at her to emphasize every word. "You contaminated the crime scene. Just like everywhere you go, you contaminate crime scenes. That's obstructing justice. I can indict you for obstructing justice."

Shuffling rapidly through avenues of escape, she finds herself worryingly coming up blank. She'd been so careful, damn it. How had she missed something that obvious?

It's still not as bad as it could be; he's stuck on finding proof of a previous mistake, not thinking ahead for further uses. Stalling for time, she puts on a meek, hopeful smile. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't."

"You don't write another word about Will Graham," Crawford snaps, "and I won't have to."

She stares after him in disbelief as Crawford straightens and stalks out the door. It's that easy? They're done? He didn't even ask her to sign anything. It's got to be a trick.

But the agents file out one by one without looking back until only Zeller is left. He pulls out a Swiss Army knife, but she can't even work up a flicker of worry for that, and sure enough, he cuts her free.

"You used me," he snarls under his breath, but then he leaves, tail between his legs. He doesn't shut the door behind himself.

Sitting at the edge of her bed, she rubs her wrists as a slow smile tugs at her mouth. Well, well. So Graham's important enough for Crawford to stage this little farce. That's interesting to know. More interesting still is Crawford letting her go, because now *she* owes *him*. She's not worried about it. He's terrible at this game.

Jack thinks he has an ace in the hole, but she's got deck after deck tucked away in her pockets, and they're all stacked in her favor.

***

The couch in Abigail's hospital room is surprisingly comfortable. Comfortable enough to sleep on, as Will should know. He'll probably do the same thing again tonight, at least until visiting hours are over. It's been a long day--a really long day--and he just...sometimes he needs a reminder of why he does this to himself.

Abigail looks a lot better lately, though it's still a shock to walk in and see her hooked up to so many tubes and machines. The side of her throat is still covered by a bandage, but her color has returned, and even with the drugs keeping her under, he gets flashes now and then of a living mind when he stares at her closed lids. She looks less like she's lost in limbo, just...on pause.

He's not sure how long he's been staring meditatively at her hospital bed when a strange, hollow thumping in the hall outside catches his attention. *Ba-bump, ba-bump*, steady as a heartbeat, but the sound has weight and force. It draws closer, gaining volume, and he turns his head to peer out the open door just as a massive beast paces by without stopping.

A velvety black muzzle. Back-swept branches of spreading antlers. A shaggy, muscular neck with feathers threaded through the dark fur. Cloven hooves that strike the tile in that distinctive beat, fore and opposite hind moving nearly in tandem. He's never seen the ravenstag of his dreams from so short a distance, but...why is it here?

***

"Oh!" Alana says quietly, pulling up short in the doorway of Abigail Hobbs' hospital room. She'd been certain she'd find Will here after hearing about that vicious article published about him, but she hadn't expected him to have company. "Hannibal," she says with a smile, checking again to make sure she hasn't awakened the tired man slumped over on the couch.

She doubts very much that she's surprised him, but Hannibal pauses regardless, the edges of a hospital blanket he'd been about to spread over Will still stretched between his hands. "Alana," he greets her with a voice equally soft. It's strange; she's had ample proof that Hannibal can be careful with humans, but watching him tuck Will in is the first time she's realized he can also be gentle. She feels almost ashamed of herself that she didn't know that before. "Have you and I come for the same reason?"

"The Tattlecrime article?" It's a struggle to keep her voice pleasant enough not to pull Will back to consciousness; he looks like he's getting the first decent sleep he's had in days.

***

Rising from the couch, Will crosses the room and steps out into the hallway. He's curious, but he feels no particular urgency. The ravenstag's presence doesn't feel like a threat, or even an omen. He's here, so it's here. Maybe they're even here for the same reason.

***

Hannibal's eyes turn hard, but paradoxically she finds that comforting. Hannibal has an intellectual appreciation for interesting people, but he rarely allows himself to connect deeply with anyone. If he's incensed on Will's behalf, then they must have hit it off far better than she'd hoped.

Nodding tightly, Hannibal steps back from the couch and turns to face her fully. "Then it seems we're both here as his friends."

Alana smiles back in response but inwardly feels like she's been dashed with cold water. She'd come to see if Will needed to talk, to offer herself up as a friendly shoulder or a willing ear, but now she wonders if her motives are entirely altruistic. How had she envisioned their conversation, really? Just two friends railing about a common enemy? Or had she planned to put her calmest face on, let Will work through his problems with a few helpful nudges to keep him on track?

She knows Hannibal shut Jack down on the subject of seeing Will unofficially. He hadn't even sounded disappointed over the missed opportunity, though his eyes had lit up every time he mentioned something Will had done or said during their time in Minnesota. That intrigued look probably had nothing to do with any of the reasons that might have been true if

Hannibal were human, but she's completely certain that Hannibal isn't here tonight in any capacity as a psychiatrist.

"Ah. Dibs?" she asks lightly, intending to bow out gracefully, only to watch some guarded contentment fade from Hannibal's face.

"Of course," he says politely, taking a step back--away from her and the couch--inclining his head. "You've known him longer; I'm sure he'd find your presence much more comfortable."

"I meant you," she stops him before he can make his excuses and run. "Since you were here first," she elaborates at his uncertain look. Gods, she really would think him smitten if that weren't so unlikely. She's nearly as amused that Hannibal Lecter is the only grown man to whom she can apply the word 'smitten' with a straight face. "I just wanted to make sure he was okay, but clearly he's in good hands."

Watching Hannibal's eyes warm always feels a little like a gift, like coaxing a wild animal close. It's not something seen by many. "You're a good friend, Alana," he says, smiling as she glances away, embarrassed. "I'll do my best not to disappoint."

***

Will stares after the ravenstag even after it turns the corner, as the sounds of its hooves fade to silence. He stares even as the empty corridors start to go dark. Night is falling; he should probably get to shelter.

Two large hands settle on his shoulders from behind. When he glances down, he sees black skin, wicked talons, but he feels no fear at all.

***

"'In the tunnels of that twisted wood, whose low prodigious oaks twine groping boughs and shine dim with the phosphorescence of strange fungi, dwell the furtive and secretive zoogs; who know many obscure secrets of the dream-world and a few of the waking world, since--'"

"What are you reading?" Will asks as he opens his eyes.

Lecter pauses, looking up from the book held cupped in both hands. Will doesn't realize how comforting Lecter's low, rumbling voice had been until it falls silent. "A travelogue," Lecter says with a faint smile. "I've always been curious to visit the dream realm, but I'm afraid my spirit is too mired in the flesh for such travels."

Blinking sleep out of his eyes, Will tries to gather his thoughts, but he's still more asleep than awake. Politeness suggests he should sit up, shake the blanket that someone gave him from his shoulders, but Lecter doesn't seem offended by his informality. Looking past the man, his eyes settle on Abigail's sleeping face, and all at once it all comes crashing down.

"You could be reading to a killer," he mumbles, pangs of loss already plucking at his heart. He doesn't believe it, but he's not naïve enough to think it matters. The mob clamoring for answers won't care where they get them; they'll tear Abigail apart if he can't keep her safe.

"She has a killer reading to her," Lecter replies, brows arching. "I fail to see the problem."

Will frowns. "Are you saying you *know*--"

"She's a hunter like her father," Lecter points out calmly. "Has she killed? Of course. Has she killed a human? Very unlikely. But you can't think I'd abandon her either way."

Pushing himself upright, Will plants his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, scrubbing at his cheeks until he feels marginally more awake. "Jack still thinks she lured those girls."

"A vulgar accusation," Lecter says, "but...entirely possible."

"That's not what happened," Will insists. He knows his defensiveness is useless here; Abigail could have been dancing widdershins around a pile of antlers in the moonlight while bathing in those girls' blood for all it would matter to Lecter. But he's just had a very sharp lesson in how damaging loose talk can be, and he needs them to stand united on this, for Abigail's sake.

Lecter nods once, accepting his certainty, but Will can tell he's not done. "Jack will ask her when she wakes up. He might even ask one of us to do it if he remains in the dark regarding our relationship."

"Do we want that?" Will asks, wondering at Lecter's hesitation.

Lecter shifts to glance back at Abigail, eyes troubled. "Our introduction to her life was unfortunately traumatic. I know Alana would prefer neither of us be immediately present when she wakes, but I find myself unable to take a neutral view."

"You think she'll be scared of us?" Will asks, stomach turning.

"I think it's likely she knows as little of Other marriages as you did, and that someone will have to explain. If it's left to an outsider...."

Will sits up and flops back, both hands bracketing the bridge of his nose and sliding down to press palm-to-palm before his mouth, thumbs hooking under his chin. He's seen how the staff looks at them. If that's Abigail's first impression of her situation now...gods.

Dropping his hands to his thighs, Will shakes his head. "Do you think...I know she gave her consent at the time, but is she even going to remember?"

"I have every hope that she will, but if not, I would rather it be one of us who reminds her. *Not* Jack Crawford."

"Or Freddie Lounds," Will agrees humorlessly, casting a nervous glance at the room's open door.

Lecter stills, eyes narrowing like an angry cat. "I saw the article. Miss Lounds has greatly overstepped herself with her accusations."

Will huffs a laugh, mostly breath. "I mean, I'd have to read up on the libel laws, but I'm willing to bet she stopped just short of anything actionable. And people who can 'do things' make good copy; you know that," he says tiredly, dropping the air quotes he makes with his fingers, hands falling limply to his sides. "It's too bad I can't ask for a cut. 'Jack Crawford's Crime Gimp' probably pulled in a nice chunk of ad revenue."

"Will," Lecter says, in that patient, gentle tone people use when they're about to say nice things he's not allowed to run away from. "Your talent is a part of you, but you are not your talent. You could have used it in a hundred different ways, or chosen never to use it at all. Instead you've chosen to give others a boon that will never be repaid, rarely even thanked. Don't let the Freddie Lounds of the world persuade you otherwise."

Will ducks his head, picking at the hem of the white blanket still draped over his legs, embarrassed yet warmed through by Lecter's assurance. He's heard it all before, but it's different coming from someone who can *see* him, maybe even the parts Will would rather he didn't.

Lecter doesn't tell him he's a good man. He's praising him for being a man who's chosen to do good.

"And Will," Lecter adds, hushed voice brimming with...something friendly. Something fond. "The mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself, not the worst of someone else."

That's a hard one to believe sometimes when the mirror goes cracked or dark, but he vows to hold on to the reminder for as long as he can.

Chapter End Notes

The bit Hannibal was reading to Abigail comes from Lovecraft's "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath."

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> Wasn't paying close enough attention and realized belatedly that Freddie's staying in a motel, not an apartment, so minor changes to previous chapter. Took a break yesterday too, just needed a day to vegetate. :3

Shutting her newly-repaired door behind her, coffee in hand, Freddie glances down at the parking lot from the second-floor landing and stares, her stride hitching in surprise. Detective Pascal, her talkative friend from the mushroom site, leans against a car at the foot of the stairs, looking like he's been waiting for hours for her to come down, prepared to wait for hours more. It's very interesting that he found her--they're hours from Elk Neck, and it's not like this motel would show up on any search as her place of residence--which suggests he still has friends on the force.

She's cautious as she makes her way down to the asphalt, but mostly she's curious. He's come a long way for...what? Revenge? Doesn't look the type. To deliver a threat, maybe, or maybe to bargain. Maybe just to vent. With any luck he'll have something useful to add to what he's already told her.

"Don't know where you got half that information," Pascal accuses, expression as stony as his eyes are fierce. "It wasn't from me."

"I may have made some inferences," she admits, shrugging lightly.

"They think I told you all of it."

"They saw you talking to me." Zeller had been a lot smarter on that front, but come *on*. There's no crime in *asking*, but there are disclosure protocols for a reason.

"They also think it's my fault Stammets escaped."

Actually they think it's her fault, but she's not interested in hosting a pity party. Might as well cut to the chase. "I'm sorry I got you fired."

"I wasn't fired," he corrects her with a frown, pulling his hands out of his pockets as she stops just within arm's reach. "I was suspended."

"Well, they're gonna fire you," she informs him with the voice of experience. "Jack Crawford will make sure of that."

"You...." His words dry up as he looks away, shaking his head until he breaks into a humorless laugh. "You stir the hornet's nest, and I'm the one who gets stung?"

"I can help you get work outside the force, if you want me to," she offers, tipping her head to the side as she watches realization dawn. "I know people in private security."

"Not the first cop you got fired," he mutters, numb.

"Guarantee you it pays better," she coaxes. He's going to need that favor, whether he knows it yet or not; he'll never work in law enforcement again. "Right now, future you is thanking me."

There's a man coming up on her right, someone who looks like he's got someplace to be and won't mind walking right through them to get there. Rude, but that's to be expected, doing business in the parking lot of a--

It's not the crack of the gunshot that startles her; it's the sudden splash of warm wetness across her face, shocking as a slap. Pascal reels backward and drops to the asphalt, a pool of blood spreading rapidly from his right temple. When she drags her eyes up again, the gunman is right there: an older man with thinning hair, black-framed glasses, clothes only a grandfather could carry off. He still has a gun in his hand, but it's pointed only vaguely at her, the muzzle tipped down.

"I read your article," he says, and oh gods, he talks with his hands. *Now* the gun's pointed at her, if only briefly. She needs to find a way to shut him up before his bad habit gets her killed. "Tell me about Will Graham."

If it keeps his mouth shut and his hands still? Gladly.

***

This isn't really how Jack wanted to spend a blustery Saturday morning. He's not great at sleeping in--neither is Bella--but grey skies make lingering over coffee in bed seem damn appealing. Now he's got a positive sighting on Stammets, which is good, and a dead cop, which is very, very bad. Freddie Lounds is just the icing on the cake.

"Jack?"

He's a little surprised to hear her calling him over, but...not that surprised, not really. The woman doesn't have an ounce of shame in her, isn't worried about keeping her head down, even now.

"Miss Lounds?" he asks as he approaches. She's sitting on the back bumper of an ambulance, a blue blanket wrapped around her shoulders, with a guard on her in case Stammets--or anyone else--comes back to finish the job. The EMTs have gotten her mostly cleaned up, except for two spots of red on her right cheek. He hates that he wonders if they've been left there just for show, but with Freddie it's always best to wonder.

"Go ahead and stand down, officer," he tells Freddie's guard, who nods once and turns immediately to go. He makes a note to himself to be very careful if he ever needs to assign real protection. Freddie hadn't been popular before, and that was before she got one of their own killed.

"Miss Lounds, are you all right?"

She looks belatedly horrified, like she's just remembered something important, and Jack braces himself, wondering what in the hell she's been stalling on this time.

"Where's Will Graham?" she asks, her face the mirror of concern.

Jack clenches his jaw. If she thinks she can use this to snag another shot at interviewing Will--

"We have an eyewitness to the murder. We don't need Will Graham."

"No, that's not why I'm asking."

He narrows his eyes. If she doesn't expect to run into him here, then....

Son of a *bitch*.

"Someone find me Will Graham!" he barks over his shoulder before turning back. "This is about Will?"

"He was talking about people having the same properties of a fungus."

"Stammets?"

"Thoughts leaping from brain to brain. They mutate, they evolve."

At least they know their guy is crazy. They may give him more nightmares with the weird shit they get up to, but he'd rather deal with the crazies than the ones who just think they're clever. "Well, what does he want with Will Graham?"

"Someone who understands him. Graham was right," she insists at Jack's puzzled look. "Stammets is looking for connections."

Maybe so, but there's no way she could know that. That's information that hasn't come close to being released, so either she has an informant within his own team, or she's been listening at doors she has no business being near. "What did you tell him?" he snaps, staring her dead in the eye. It's the only reason he sees the shadow of a smile shift the tension of her mouth, brightening her eyes, there and gone. "I need to know," he says slowly and deliberately as she looks away, "what you told Eldon Stammets about Will Graham."

She nods faintly, almost to herself, as she comes to a decision. He hopes she's gotten her kicks just then from withholding information, because he's not going to stand for her bullshit today.

"I told him about the Hobbs girl."

"What did you tell him?"

"Everything," she says, self-righteous, as if to ask what else she could have done. "He wants to help Will Graham connect with Abigail Hobbs. He's gonna bury her."

Great. Just fucking great. Like Will needs another reason to see the Hobbs girl as a victim in need of a protector. She's not even awake, and she's got him wrapped around her goddamn finger. There's one benefit to Will's obsession, at least.

When Jack pulls out his phone, he's pretty sure he knows exactly where Will will be.

***

The thing about having dogs is that while he can shuffle right back to bed after feeding them, there's no possible way he can sleep in. They're good dogs, don't generally cause a lot of fuss, but if he lies in bed too long, he'll have a constant parade of wet noses nudging into his hand, just a gentle reminder that there are loyal companions patiently starving to death, if that's something Will cares about. No pressure.

Most days it's easier to just stay up, but today in particular he makes an effort, feeding himself as well as the dogs after letting them out to piss on trees and investigate what might have scurried by in the night. He's got a date with Lecter at the hospital to discuss Abigail's options for after she wakes up, and he doesn't want to be late.

It's an hour's drive from Wolf Trap to Baltimore, and he gives himself a little extra time, just in case traffic's bad. Weekends usually see a flip--people driving out of the city for a day in the country instead of heading in to work--but the traffic gods are fickle. He does pass one accident, but it's minor, so even though he lives much further away, he's pretty sure he's beaten Lecter to the hospital. It's still a few minutes to nine when he strolls through the doors.

He's got the check-in procedure down to a science, and he takes the elevator to Abigail's floor on autopilot. Mostly he's thinking of Jack, the hoops the FBI are going to make Abigail jump through. There'll be questions, and evaluations, and court-ordered therapy--that last had been one of the conditions of allowing them to take over as Abigail's guardians, witness or not. Usually Will has no use for therapy, but in this case? He's willing to be convinced.

Stepping out of the elevator, he pulls out his cell phone on the first ring, pausing just a few feet away when he checks the display and sees it's from Jack. Maybe there's been a break in the case? If he needs to turn around and head back out again--

"Hello?"

"*Will, it's Jack. Are you at the hospital*?"

"Yes, I am." Shit. Stammets isn't *actively looking* for diabetics now, is he?

"*Stammets knows about Abigail*."

His pulse kicks into high gear before his brain can even process that, right hand scrabbling for his gun even as he hangs up on Jack and scrolls through his contacts to Lecter's number.

"*Will*?"

"Are you here?" Will demands as he jogs down the corridor, looking up and down the hall for even a glimpse of anything suspicious.

"*Yes*."

"So is Stammets. He's after Abigail."

He's not sure which of them hangs up first as he stuffs his phone back into his pocket. Taking a two-handed grip on his gun just outside Abigail's room, he pivots through the doorway and brings his weapon up...on nothing. The room and the bed are both empty.

Panic sings through him. What is Stammets even thinking? She doesn't fit the profile for any of his other victims...what the fuck is he planning to do?

Tearing back out of the room, he jogs a few more feet down the hall and all but lunges for the nurses' station. "Where is she?" he barks at the nurse on duty. "Abigail Hobbs, the girl in 408. Where is she?"

The nurse shakes her head, confused by his urgency. "They took her for tests."

"Who took her?" His words emerge breathless, terror sealing his throat. "Who took her?" he repeats, sharp and authoritative.

"I...I don't know."

Damn it. *Think*. Whatever Stammets has planned, he can't do it here. He needs a place to plant his idea, time to watch it grow. He'll be taking her out of the hospital, but he can't just wheel her through the front doors. The entrance the ambulance crews use to transfer patients? Too visible. But there'll be a dock the hospital's vendors use to pick up records and deliver supplies, and he'd bet it's manned a lot more sporadically than anywhere that might involve patients.

He snags a door badge from an outraged RN and takes the stairs, knowing the elevator is only going to spit him out in public areas and trusting his feet to get him there a little faster than whatever lift system the hospital uses to transport gurneys from level to level. Ground floor? Basement floor? He stops at the first, knowing it's going to cost him less time and effort to go down another flight than climb back up if he's wrong, and gets lucky. When he throws the door open and charges out into the main corridor, he finds Stammets trying to maneuver an uncooperative stretcher around a corner up ahead, camouflaged in stolen scrubs.

"Hey!" he shouts, taking a shooter's stance. Stammets casts a look over his shoulder, and when he sees Will, he hesitates. No. He *reacts*.

Stammets yelps as the bullet tears through his right shoulder, dropping his own gun as he staggers back from the gurney. Fetching up against the wall, he slides down it, curling in on himself like a child, clutching his wound. Making his way over cautiously, Will kicks Stammets' gun away, putting himself between Stammets and Abigail. Keeping his own gun trained on Stammets, he reaches back and presses his fingers to the unbandaged side of Abigail's throat, searching for a pulse. By the Black Mother Herself, if he doesn't find one--

But it's there: slow but strong. Thank the fucking gods.

"What were you going to do to her?" he asks as he lets Abigail go, taking a menacing step closer to the panting, bleeding man huddled on the floor.

"We all evolved from mycelium," Stammets explains haltingly. "I'm simply reintroducing her to the concept."

"By burying her alive?"

Stammets looks puzzled. Disappointed. "The journalist said you understood me."

Journalist? Freddie *fucking* Lounds?

"I don't," Will snarls through clenched teeth.

Back the way he came, the heavy door to the stairwell thumps closed a second time, echoing in the deserted corridor. He really hopes that's Jack and not security, considering he currently looks like a madman about to execute a staff member, but he doesn't hear a single footstep after. Good.

Stammets looks like he might burst into tears, and not from the pain. "Well you would have. You would have. If you walk through a field of mycelium, they know you are there; they know you are *there*. The spores...*reach* for you as you walk by. I know who you're reaching for," Stammets insists, eyes cutting past Will to the pale girl on the stretcher. "I *know*. Abigail Hobbs. And you should have let me plant her. You would have found her i--"

Movement. On his right. Not slow, not fast: purposeful, and coming closer. Stammets looks first, face blanking with such pure bafflement, Will risks a glance himself.

That's Lecter coming down the hall towards them, head tipped down, eyes fixed unblinkingly on Stammets. He's lost his shoes and suit jacket somewhere, and that's probably his waistcoat lying crumpled on the floor behind him, and...why is he working at the cuffs of his--wait, why is his shirt unbuttoned in the first--

"Oh, shit," Will breathes as the shirt hits the floor, and between one stride and the next, Lecter *changes*.

Big is his first thought, and it's a highly relevant one, because the Thousand are like snakes: the better they eat, the bigger and faster they grow. Before his eyes, Lecter gains a foot, almost two, skin washing carbon-black like a glass poured full of ink. Antlers slide through his bare scalp like knives, trailing glistening, dark ichor along the twisting snarl of tines that stretch tall enough to nearly scrape the high ceilings. As the color bleeds from his eyes, his already-sharp teeth lengthen and turn vicious, nails thickening and lengthening to talons. Those hands look strangely familiar; they're almost enough to distract him from the way Lecter's tailored slacks strain to contain the muscles of his thighs, only saved from shredding off him at the seams by the greyhound leanness of his hips and waist.

Drawn out of his shocked staring by Stammets' high, thin screech, Will blinks and shakes his head, feeling oddly like he's been mesmerized by a cobra. *Some fucking mongoose*, he thinks, and that--that reminds him suddenly of exactly who he's dealing with.

"Dr. Lecter," he calls, moving to intercept the man, who doesn't look like he's heard him at all. "Wait. Doc--*Hannibal*," he says more insistently, stretching his arms out to either side. Fuck, Lecter is enormous--impressive even as a human, but like this he's nothing but muscle and sinew stretched over heavy, staring bone. Will's sure he could count every one of Lecter's ribs, but it'd be the work of seconds for those corded arms and spearpoint talons to rip him in half.

Vaguely Will registers the way Hannibal differs from his expectations: he's completely hairless, without even a trace of fur, and his dead-white eyes don't resemble the rest of his kin's at all. He sets all that aside to puzzle over later. He has much more immediate concerns.

He half expects Lecter to push right past him, but instead he stops, so close Will can feel the heat radiating off him. The wild, woodsy scent Will had thought was Lecter's cologne is stronger now, but not unpleasant--*much* nicer than the acrid stench of urine as Stammets' bladder legs go in sheer terror. Though Lecter's eggshell eyes never shift from Stammets, Will's pretty sure he's listening. It's maybe not much, but he'll take it.

"Hannibal," he says again: calmly, not a command. "Let him go."

"Protecting our witness is my right." Hannibal's voice is deeper than before, rumbly with a hint of a growl. Could be anger. Could just be the way he sounds with that broader chest. It's still the same voice he knows, just...different.

"Then that makes it mine too, right?" he asks bluntly, tipping his head far back to meet Hannibal's eyes if they can be pulled away from their prey. "And I have."

Hannibal's upper lip peels back from sharp fangs as his eyes narrow, but he doesn't sweep Will aside. Will doesn't back down.

"Hannibal. I've got it," he says firmly. When Hannibal huffs a sharp sigh, Will offers a faint smile. He knows. *Fuck*, he knows. When he saw Abigail's empty bed-- "Let me do this."

He's asking, not demanding, and it works. Hannibal's jaw clenches, but he backs off, looking at last where Abigail lies, sleeping all this time. He circles around Will, and Will lets him. It's not like he has any hope of restraining Hannibal physically if he decides to go for Stammets after all, but all he does is loom at Abigail's bedside, leaning down a little for an assessing sniff. One big hand reaches for her, claws curled mindfully in as he brushes the backs of his fingers down her cheek above the bandage. She must be okay, because when he turns, he shifts again, shrinking down to a more manageable size as his skin blushes with color.

"My apologies," Hannibal says, sounding far more composed than Will would have been at finding himself half-naked in a deserted hospital corridor, though he still looks vaguely troubled. "I was led to believe the protection of a witness was a matter of tradition, but it seems there may be an element of instinct to it as well."

Will looks him over curiously, and he can see it plain as day. Hannibal's reaction had surprised him too.

"Yeah, well...guess the cat had to come out of the bag sometime," Will says with a shrug, holstering his gun. Stammets won't be going anywhere with Lecter standing guard, but the only way he won't spill the beans during questioning is if he's already begged for protection the minute Jack arrives.

Hannibal frowns, looking Stammets over with open dislike. "It's not too late for me to remove the problem."

Will snorts. He has the weirdest certainty that he's going to be talking Hannibal out of eating Will's collars for the rest of his career. Not because Hannibal is hungry; because he's trying to be *nice*. "Hey, you saved her last time." Shooting Hobbs doesn't count; she would have died anyway if Hannibal weren't there. "It's my turn."

He doesn't even think about how that might sound until Stammets' eyes get wider and more horrified, like he thinks Will is going to eat him if Hannibal doesn't.

Gods, he hopes they can keep the press away from this guy for a good long while. Freddie Lounds is going to have a field day.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stammets has a meltdown when Jack and the response team arrive. It looks genuine enough to Will, not a ploy to garner sympathy, which just infuriates him even more. He tries not to show it, knows he should walk away before he does or says something he'll regret, but he's not budging until Abigail can be returned to her room. At least he has Hannibal for a distraction, though his only response to Will's disgusted huff is a raised brow.

"The people he killed didn't stand a chance," Will growls, embarrassed enough by his own ire that he feels the need to explain himself. "He didn't even look them in the eye, just let them slip away to be collected at leisure. But now that it's his turn...." He clenches his jaw, shakes his head. It's not surprising to him, that lack of empathy, but he can't distance himself from how personal it feels.

"Please," Stammets whines as the medical team works on his shoulder, Jack standing over him but casting dark looks down the hall at Will and Hannibal. "Don't let them eat me."

Fan-fucking-tastic.

"Indeed," Hannibal says, ignoring Stammets in favor of Will. He's had time to get dressed, almost immaculate once more, though his pants are a little the worse for wear. He doesn't seem nearly as chagrined by that as Will would have expected, given the quality of his wardrobe. "Of course, it's unlikely he thinks of it that way...he may not even consider those people his victims."

Will heaves a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I know. He wasn't trying to be cruel. He was just trying to provoke an evolution. Too bad he used the wrong kind of fungus."

"There's a time and a place to support your local farmers," Hannibal agrees, deadpan until Will lets loose with a quiet snort. "When inducing fresh cryptomutations, I believe it's wiser to import."

Will allows a lopsided smile to break free, but it fades away quickly when he glances at the pale young woman on the gurney to his right. A pair of doctors hover over Abigail, one checking her vitals, the other muttering under his breath about amateurs and extubations. If it turns out Stammets hurt her in any way taking her off the machines....

"She'll be fine," Hannibal promises, leaning in but keeping his chin tucked, lashes half-draped over lowered eyes. With nothing to brace against or avoid, Will can appreciate the attempt at comfort for what it is. "She smells of healing, not new damage."

"I'm not sure whether I should envy your nose or offer my condolences...but thanks."

"Dr. Collins?" a nurse calls from the other side of Jack and the response team, watching Stammets warily. Both of the doctors hovering over Abigail look up expectantly, one more quickly than the other. "The room's ready."

With Stammets caught in the act, the forensics team may have made quick work of Abigail's room, but Will's not worried. They're all experts; personality conflicts aside, he trusts them to do a thorough job.

He's about to follow the doctors back up, Hannibal falling in at his side, when Jack plants himself between them and the fast-disappearing stretcher. "Don't let me keep you, Dr. Lecter," Jack says, turning his head but not his eyes toward Hannibal. "I just have some questions for Will."

Hannibal hesitates, looking to him instead of bowing out gracefully. Will appreciates that. A lot.

"It's fine," Will says, staring hard at Jack's right ear. "Keep an eye on our girl."

"Of course," Hannibal murmurs but doesn't leave immediately, fixing Jack with a pointed look before gliding imperturbably past.

"Want to tell me what Lecter's doing here?" Jack asks once Hannibal's safely out of earshot.

Will scowls. "He's got as much right to visit Abigail as I do."

"Uh-huh. And maybe you'd also like to tell me why a murder suspect is convinced he's going to be eaten without a trial. Or maybe why Dr. Lecter looks like someone's taken a seam ripper to his clothes."

"He was just arriving when Abigail was abducted. He--"

"No," Jack breaks in flatly. "Don't even try to tell me Lecter just up and decided to play hero on his own. I get that *you* think Abigail Hobbs needs someone to step in and save her, but do you have any idea of the kind of trouble Dr. Lecter would find himself in if he killed a human he wasn't tithed?"

Will swallows a bark of incredulous laughter, realizing abruptly that he's being cast as the bad influence here. He could sidestep again, come up with another plausible excuse that would buy them another day or two of Jack's ignorance, but it suddenly doesn't seem worth it. "Even if she's his bond witness?"

Jack stills, expression freezing, but he doesn't seem to harbor any confusion over Will's meaning. He's quick to connect the dots; Jack may be single-minded, but he's far from stupid. "You and Lecter."

"Filed with the registry and everything."

Jack nods, clenching his jaw. "Well. That's great. That's one less bit of paperwork I'm going to have to worry about. In the meantime, you can consider yourself suspended."

Shit. He'd known this was a possibility; instead of backpedaling, he digs in his heels. "Because Stammets decided to retaliate with a kidnapping?"

"No, because you neglected to disclose your relationship to a murder suspect!"

"Come off it, Jack," Will barks right back, baring his teeth. "She's never been formally investigated, and she never will be--there's no proof!"

"She was placed at the cabin by numerous eyewitnesses--"

"Of course she was!" Will's almost startles himself as he matches Jack for volume and wrath, weight balanced forward on the balls of his feet. The corridor goes deathly silent, even Stammets' whimpering choked off as the onlookers hold their breath. "Her dad was *obsessed*--why wouldn't he have her with him as often as he could? But killing a girl who looked just like her, right in front of her?" Will shakes his head sharply, arm swinging out as if to cut that idea off at the neck. "No. He loved her *too much*, Jack. That's been the problem from the start. He didn't want her scared, and he damn sure didn't want her to run."

"She could still have been the lure."

Will snorts. "I'm a fisherman, Jack. I craft my own lures. And I can conclusively state that not one of them has ever known what I'm using them for. Now if you'll excuse me--"

"And where do you think you're going?" Jack growls as Will tries to circle around him.

Will smiles tightly. "Well, since I'm suspended, I thought I'd go see how my husband's taking nearly losing our daughter to negligence."

Derailed again, Jack eyes him silently, a muscle in his jaw jumping. His scowl is some strange mix of recognition, resentment and rue, but it feels impersonal, as if Will is more a reminder than the cause. It distracts Jack long enough for Will to make a strategic retreat, but his satisfaction over his victory is dampened as realization sets in. He'd said 'daughter,' but he and Hannibal aren't really Abigail's fathers, even if something inside him wants to protest vigorously. Gods, he needs to watch that. He *killed* her father; letting himself think he can just step in and replace the man is crass at best.

The furious energy of before has all but drained from him by the time he reaches Abigail's room--the same one as previous, right outside the nurses' station, where she was supposed to have been safe. Shoulders slumped, he shuffles into the room, only to stop dead two steps inside. Hannibal's there, sitting on the surprisingly comfortable couch, but the hospital bed is empty.

"What happened?" Will demands, heart in his throat. "Where's Abigail?"

"She's quite all right," Hannibal replies with an understanding smile. "Since we can't predict when she'll wake, Dr. Collins felt it best to intubate again, providing she can tolerate the procedure. They'll bring her back once they're certain she's in the clear."

Blowing out a sigh of relief, Will stumbles over, ignoring the two chairs to collapse on the other side of the couch. "Gods, this day," he mutters, dropping his head all the way back, eyes closed. "And it's not even noon," he adds with a tired laugh.

"Are you all right?"

Rolling his head to the right, Will cracks an eye open to find Hannibal frowning minutely, honest concern in the tucked corners of his mouth.

"Fine," he says automatically. "I mean, on suspension, but fine."

Hannibal sits up straighter, frown deepening. "If this has anything to do with my lapse of control...."

"More like my failure to fill Jack in on our relationship with Abigail, although I'm pretty sure he thinks I've been filling your head with pathos and biased detective work."

"And he thinks I'd be susceptible to either?" Hannibal asks, bemused.

"Well, your performance downstairs made quite the impression--on Stammets, at least," Will teases through half a grin. Hannibal's face settles into what passes for a grimace for him: a slight curl to his lip, a troubled crease between his brows, mouth downturned. It isn't the first time Hannibal has seemed surprised at himself and his reactions, but this time it doesn't feel quite so rude to ask. "These instincts...they've really blindsided you, haven't they?"

Hannibal sighs faintly, one hand smoothing imaginary wrinkles from the front of his suit. "Between my nature and my upbringing, my knowledge of our customs was largely acquired through anecdote, not experience. Unfortunately what's true for some bloodlines doesn't appear to stretch to all."

And for some reason he's never consulted his own siblings--won't, for reasons Will instinctively knows are more than a matter of pride. He gnaws his lower lip, uncertain whether to ask or not, though he thinks they know each other well enough by now that if he touches on a nerve, Hannibal will simply let him know and move the conversation on. "So...when you changed. I noticed you looked a bit different than what I was picturing." The broods are all generally homogenous; even when the mating occurs between an Other and a human, the human's genetics only provide a framework for the Other's DNA to build upon and erase. But when the mother *is* the Other...he's never been in the habit of wondering where the Black Mother acquires Her mates, but he's wondering now.

Hannibal nods easily enough, but his eyes go immediately to the door. "Considering the luck we've had with curious ears, I'm afraid that might be a conversation best suited for a more private setting. Are you certain I can't tempt you to lunch?" he asks, brows arching hopefully as he glances back to Will.

He could say no, but the reluctance he might have felt weeks before has vanished. If he can trust Hannibal not to gut him on the way to his rightful prey, surely he can trust what makes it to his plate. “If you’re cooking? Consider me tempted,” he assures before Hannibal can make a diplomatic counteroffer.

He wonders if Hannibal even realizes the way he practically preens at the compliment, amiable mask cracking on quiet pleasure.

They stay out of the way as Abigail is returned to the room an hour later, though Hannibal watches the transfer from gurney to bed with a keen eye. It looks like it costs him not to step in and take over, though he's been a model next-of-kin so far. If Will had the experience to care for a comatose patient, he'd be tempted as well.

"How is she?" Will asks the moment the doctor turns their way.

"Very well, all things considered," Dr. Collins replies, glancing once at the clipboard in his hand before offering it up to Hannibal. Will has no idea whether that even approaches standard procedure, but it pleases Hannibal immensely. How much that has to do with the knowledge that Hannibal nearly tore a man apart right downstairs is hard to say. Dr. Collins has been a rock through all of this, singularly disinterested in anything that doesn't have to do with his patient's care. Hannibal's Otherness doesn't seem to fall under that label. "There shouldn't be any lingering effects beyond some additional soreness should she wake before it wears off. We ran her bloodwork as well, but nothing unusual showed up on her panels, so it looks like Stammets didn't have time to give her anything before you caught him."

Will runs a hand over his lower face, eyes wide. "I...hadn't considered that, but that's...that's very good to know."

Collins nods. "The original wound is looking very nice as well. At this stage of healing, I think she could be allowed to wake naturally. We'd keep her for a few days for observation, of course, but it's my understanding she'll be transferred to an inpatient psychiatric facility from here?"

"A stipulation for our retaining guardianship, yes, but with certain allowances in determining a suitable location," Hannibal replies without missing a beat. "My first choice would be Port Haven, but the discussion we planned has been unexpectedly derailed," he adds, looking apologetically to Will.

"Well, they're the best in the state," Collins says, stern face relaxing in approval, "so if you have a chance to get her in there, I'd say do it. They've seen a lot of unique cases, and it won't be the first time they've had someone caught in the eye of the media."

That's an important point, but Will waits until Collins leaves before turning to Hannibal. "Port Haven?"

"I have pamphlets--not just for Port Haven."

"Of course you do," Will says, as smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Care to discuss it over lunch?" He still wants to sit with Abigail a while before they leave, and Hannibal isn't exactly a chore to talk to. He has the knack of keeping a conversation going so effortlessly that even a man as habitually awkward as Will doesn't notice the strain. Plus he has a lovely speaking voice; if Abigail can hear him at all, surely it...helps, somehow, to have something so pleasant guarding her sleep.

The neighborhood he follows Hannibal to is well out of his own price range, and he doesn't exactly make pennies as a teacher at Quantico. It's probably out of range of an ordinary psychiatrist as well, however select his clientele, which just reinforces Will's guess that Hannibal comes from money. It's a curious thought; he can see why a well-to-do family might want an Other--and more importantly their boons--on retainer, but Hannibal speaks of his human family with unmistakable fondness.

And not to put too fine a point on it, but there are easier ways to secure access to the child of a god than inviting one of the most dangerous creatures alive into your home.

Hannibal's house might be more accurately described as an edifice. Three stories, the interior lavish with dark woods and rich, muted colors. The décor is more in line with what one would expect of an Other in his position--classical artwork themed around brushes with godhood, a tasteful touch of antlers here and there--but that's just it: it's what one would expect. It strikes an off note with Will until he remembers Hannibal's talk of dinner parties. Hannibal seems comfortable enough here, but this is where he *entertains*. Will finds himself suddenly curious if there's any part of the house that isn't part of the stage.

"Welcome to the monster's den," Hannibal says, taking Will's coat, an unmistakable glint of humor in his eyes as he catches Will eyeing a painting of Actaeon caught mid-transformation, the shadowy figures he came upon in the woods discernable only by their hungry eyes. "It's not an invitation I'd extend to many, but make yourself at home."

"To be fair, it's not an invitation I'd believe from many, social convention being what it is." And it's not like he's much more welcome than an Other at the door when he does show up.

"Not used to being certain of your welcome?" There's no sting to his words; Hannibal sounds genuinely curious, as if he can think of no reason anyone might find Will's company objectionable.

"Let's just say it means more coming from someone willing to acknowledge their territorial tendencies," Will hedges. Hannibal isn't his psychiatrist; he's not going to dump a lifetime of polite snubs and pointed exclusions on the man without even paying for the privilege.

"Hm. Well, I can assure you, my kitchen is always open to friends. And on that note, shall we?"

Hannibal's kitchen is still something of a showroom, but the easy contentment Hannibal radiates says the room was designed for Hannibal's satisfaction alone. Shrugging off his jacket and rolling up his shirt sleeves, Hannibal ties a chef's apron around his waist without a flicker of irony and no more drama than Hannibal is wont to give anything. If Will were to try and pull that look off, he'd probably manage 'frumpy' at best, but somehow Hannibal still looks sharp.

"I hope you'll forgive me for plotting ahead," Hannibal begins, but instead of opening the refrigerator, he heads back to the chair where he left his suit jacket and pulls a handful of pamphlets from an inner pocket. "I know we agreed to choose together, but I thought I might take the liberty of narrowing the field before we start. There are unfortunately a number of

facilities with a good reputation amongst the public that don't share the same standing amongst their peers in the profession, which I happen to be in a position to know."

"That's fine," Will says automatically. As he flips though the brochures he's been handed, it's obvious there's no need for his famous stubbornness to rear its head. Aside from Port Haven--which is in Baltimore, yes, but on the outskirts, splitting the difference between the city and Wolf Trap--there are as many locations in Virginia as Maryland, and all of them come with glowing reputations...as well as hefty price tags. "I can't let you pay for this all yourself," Will realizes aloud. He really should have said something before this; Hannibal's been picking up more than his fair share of the tab.

"If it troubles you, I won't insist, but it's really of no concern. If anything, I feel it's only right; you had no idea what you were asking, but I knew exactly what I was doing." Here he pauses, and adds, almost sheepishly, "Up to a point, at least."

Will cracks a smile. "Yeah, it's everything after that point that's been the adventure, I'm guessing. If you don't mind my asking, who did you learn about Other customs from? If there was a who."

Behind the prep counter, Hannibal nods. He's got a knife in hand, but the usual risk assessment doesn't trigger. If Hannibal wanted to kill a man, his own natural weapons would more than suffice. "My aunt. After my parents died, she and my Uncle Robertas found me and took me in. She was very distant kin on my Father's side; many generations removed, but the spark was still there, enough that she was friendly with the Other community in Paris. She or her connections taught me most of what I know."

Will digests most of that with only half a mind. "Found you?" he asks before he can stop himself.

Hannibal's hands pause on the fish he's been delicately filleting, but he doesn't lift his head. "We lived quite close to a forest known to be frequented by my Mother's children. Before my human mother found me, I spent my earliest weeks avoiding them. When they attacked, I was too weak to do anything about it, never having partaken before of the kind of fare that would have made me truly strong. It was a slaughter," he says grimly, a muscle in his jaw twitching before he single-mindedly begins cutting again.

There's so much to unpack in that, Will doesn't know where to begin. A slaughter? Of how many people? If the Lecters are as prominent as he now suspects, it's probably a matter of public record, but--what did Hannibal mean by partaken *before?* Did he manage to take one out on his own? How many were there? And--

"I'm sorry," Will says, trying to halt the mad snowballing of his thoughts. "They sounded like good people." They must have been, for Hannibal to speak so fondly of them.

Hannibal nods again, quiet for a while before clearing his throat. "I learned to hunt after that, and was well on my way to returning to my roots when Murasaki tracked me down and dragged me back to civilization." The tiny smile that tugs at the right corner of his mouth is a complicated thing: wry, even a touch bitter, but with a strained fondness that speaks of forgiveness.

"You said she was kin on your Father's side?" He knows Hannibal said they wouldn't be the first to have married, but the idea is still hard to wrap his head around. And that first pairing might not have been anything so cozy. Not all the broods coexist well together, even amongst themselves; it's not unusual, if frowned-upon, for them to seek less fraught relations elsewhere. It's a reprehensible double-standard to Will's mind, but unless it's ruled an act of rape, they don't even need to register it as a tithe, even though it usually results in the human mother's death.

And then there's the gods, but that's beyond the scope of any Compact or social construct to constrain.

"Yes. I am a Thousand twice over; my Father is the Lord of a Thousand Faces. As you can see," he adds with a valiant touch of humor, "I contain multitudes."

Will's startled into a laugh, but gods, that makes so much sense. "So you...not to be rude, but you're very different from the Black Mother's usual brood."

"Uncommonly social," Hannibal agrees, ungrudging. "That would be my Father's influence at work. Like Him, His children are driven to assimilate, disguise, adapt. My Mother's children are given the gift of simply knowing; my Father's children always want to know *why*. *Why* is the first step to *how*, and from there you can begin to influence, change. When I was younger, I channeled that focus into surgery. When that lost its shine, I entered the study of the mind and kept my hands busy with the culinary arts, and no one has died as a result of my cooking yet."

Will notices he doesn't mention his therapy in the same positive light, but he knows that sometimes, though no one's fault, all the soul-searching and drugs in the world aren't enough.

"And that's why you looked how you did earlier."

"Neither one nor the other. I have much of the shape of the Young, but with obvious differences, and as a mimic, my abilities are woefully incomplete. A true child of my Father could take any shape they desired; I'm merely fortunate that the human form is the one transformation I can manage, not having the racial memory of it to fall back on as many do."

"Well, it was very impressive," Will admits, thrown back again to that first startling impression of looming danger, terrifying strength and starvation leanness evenly balanced. The Young are always hungry, everybody knows that, but Hannibal had given the impression of a creature in his prime, established in his territory and sated in his hunts.

Hannibal pauses again, but this time he looks up to meet Will's eyes. They're both guarded, so there's no shock of instant connection, but Will can feel the difference in Hannibal's shields: soft, willing to give with a single push. He's holding up a curtain for Will's sake, but Will could be on the other side of the veil with no effort at all if he wanted.

"Not impressive enough to cow you, it seems." He doesn't sound upset. If anything he sounds hopeful.

"I didn't realize you wanted to," Will hedges, arching a brow.

"I didn't."

Will allows himself a smile. "Then it sounds like we're well on our way to making this marriage work."

Chapter End Notes

I'm sort of working with the concept of "if you call them by name, duck," so if it isn't entirely clear, Hannibal's father is Nyarlathotep, and yes, this story is basically set in the Sustenance 'verse, except the Others are entirely out in the open here where they were known but very hush-hush in the other.

Also let me know about any typos, please...I'm kind of partially blind in one eye at this point, so it's kind of hard to see what I'm typing, lol.

Chapter 12

It's late, past appointment hours, and Hannibal is just finishing writing up his notes from his last patient when there's a knock on his office door. It's unusual to say the least; his patients all have an emergency number to a service that will contact him, but few would simply show up on his doorstep unannounced. His first thought is Will, that Jack's consultation with Internal Affairs might have gone poorly and the threat of suspension has blown up into something bigger, but Will has his personal number, would have called first.

Finding Alana in his waiting room is a surprise. She looks grave, jaw set and mouth firm, but her eyes are filled with some shadowed concern. He's considered she might be stung by his secrecy, but this looks like something more.

Schooling his face, he asks, "Do you have an appointment?"

"Do you have a beer?" she fires right back, deadpan.

A smile breaks free as he steps away from the door, bowing his head a fraction in acknowledgement. Not terribly angry with him, then, or at least not angry enough to forego their usual banter. He's always liked that about Alana: from her earliest days as a bright young student, she's stood firm in her resolve to treat him as nothing but a fellow colleague and friend. He very much suspects his Otherness makes him paradoxically safe, more likely to treat her as a human first, a woman second if at all.

Playing host forestalls the interrogation sure to come. As it happens, he can indeed fulfil her request; she isn't the only colleague he's had join him in his office, though usually his meetings are of a less personal nature. By the time he returns, along with a glass of wine for himself, she's made herself comfortable on the more businesslike of his two couches, her expression gone pensive.

"Interesting day at the office?" he asks as he hands her her glass, deciding to tackle this conversation head-on.

"Interesting conversation with Jack. He wanted to know if I knew you and Will were involved--and when I knew it, if I did."

"And what did you tell him?"

She's used to him, no longer caught off guard when curiosity and practicality overwhelms a more conventional response, but she still shoots him a look, lips pursed and nostrils flaring. "I told him I had no more idea than he did. I just have to wonder why that is, considering you've had several opportunities to share the good news."

"If it's any consolation, we haven't made any sort of announcement."

"Yes, and why is that? This secrecy isn't like you, Hannibal. You've always lived your life entirely out in the open. If I had to name one person who had nothing to hide, you'd be at the

top of that list. So why this? Why start now?"

Allowing no hint at the amusement he feels to cross his face, he notes, "I suspect you have an idea already."

Alana narrows her eyes at his evasiveness but masters herself quickly, taking a sip of her beer while she gathers her thoughts. Staring into her glass, she says, "Jack thinks you've both taken leave of your senses. That you'd have let Abigail Hobbs die without remorse if your attachment to Will wasn't genuine. But I know you, Hannibal. You have this inexplicable soft spot where children are concerned, whatever their species. You'd have saved her, whatever it cost you."

He doesn't allow himself to react, though she's unsettlingly close to dredging up memories he'd rather were left buried. He focuses instead on where she went wrong, the assumption that he'd let anyone disrupt the place in the world he's carved for himself. It's always interesting to hear what he looks like through others' eyes, and Alana's view of him is more charitable than most.

"You're worried I've inadvertently claimed a daughter and gained a husband as baggage?" he asks with a touch of humor.

"I just want to know if this is something you want," she says carefully, genuine worry darkening her eyes.

He doesn't laugh. If either of them is blinded by sentiment, it certainly isn't him. But it is...kind of her, he realizes, to worry that he might feel trapped by circumstances beyond even his control.

"It's nothing so dire as all that, I assure you," he says warmly, tilting his head in her direction. "You're correct that it's not a conventional relationship, but Will and I have reached a mutual understanding. We have much in common, after all; both loners by nature, both...pleasantly surprised by the idea of fatherhood. You must know, I never thought to have a family of my own. That Fortune has seen fit to give me one regardless...who am I to turn down such gifts?"

Eyes softening with surprise, Alana breaks into a hesitant smile. "You actually want this to work."

"I do. It may be untraditional in every sense, but my expectations were never so high."

He watches as Alana struggles briefly with words she keeps tucked firmly behind her teeth, steady gaze flickering to the glass in her hands, his desk, anywhere but at him. Something salacious, no doubt; a warning to keep his expectations low, perhaps? He wonders if that's her protectiveness of Will speaking or something more and feels his throat tighten on an unvoiced growl.

Inconvenient, these instincts. He's almost tempted to hunt one of his own kind for answers instead of amusement, but before his mood can sour enough to make him consider it in earnest, the memory of Will's unthiking: *"No plans"* negates that urge. Whatever Alana's feelings might be, they're either not returned or have gone completely unnoticed. If it means

keeping peace with his own baser nature, he's more than willing to ensure things remain in that state.

"Well," she says after a moment, fixing a bright smile that *wants* to be whole-hearted on her lips. "I hope you know what you're doing, but it sounds like you have things well in hand. Just remember I'm here if you ever need to talk."

"The mentee becomes the mentor?" he has to ask, arching a brow. If she thinks to school him on how to have a relationship with a human, she's decades too late. If instead she means to give him advice on how to keep a lasting one....

"Just a friendly ear," she admits wryly. "Relationships haven't really been my priority. If things work out for you two, maybe you can give me some pointers."

"It would be my pleasure," he says.

He refuses to think of the very real pleasure he'll derive from making it clear that ship has sailed.

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Time has gone strange. It loops, curls in on itself, days repeating or sliding almost imperceptibly into nightmares, as if the boundary between her world and the dream-world has fallen without the panic she would've expected. In some of her waking moments, she's with her father, hunting or traveling or...at the cabin, and that's where the nightmares start. An endless string of dead girls laid across their butchering table, without even the thin necessity of a ritual to sanctify it.

In her nightmares he asks her to help him, and she always thinks she won't, but she always ends up with a knife in her hand, the doe she thought was safe staring up at her with accusing human eyes.

Today they're hunting again: her first deer, which she's seen played out so many times now, but this time...this time is different. It's not a doe this time: young, unmated, because they never hunt the mothers; mothers are special. It's a stag, big as an elk, its shaggy black pelt shot through with dark feathers. She looks up at her dad, but he doesn't seem to notice the strangeness, his teeth bared in an anticipatory grin.

The stag is looking right at her, and though it should seem monstrous, its eyes are gentle, unafraid. It snorts softly, taking her scent, and waits.

Her hands tremble on her rifle, sweat slicking her palms inside her gloves. She can't. She can't *do* this, not when he's just going to *let her*--

Two hands, broad and strong, settle on her shoulders from behind, but her father hasn't moved, hasn't noticed anything. They might as well be separated by a sheet of glass. The hands aren't human; they're black and clawed and far too large, but she finds herself relaxing, tensed shoulders lowering though the hands remain light as cobwebs. There's movement at

her back, the sense of something large looming close, and then a voice: low, soft, a deep, masculine tone furred by the hint of a growl.

"It's all right, Abigail. It's all over now. You're ours; all you need to do is trust us."

Her breath hitches, eyes rolling wildly since she can't seem to turn her head. On her right, she sees the sees the narrowest gleam of dark antlers, pointed like knives, and all at once she sags in the grip of those hands.

She's fine. She's *fine*. He's one of *them,* but she's been consecrated to the Mother her entire life. He won't hurt her, not when she's been faithful, not when she hasn't been *given.*

She stills again as an ugly suspicion wriggles its way in. *Oh, gods.* Was *that* what her father was...?

"Hush, now. Slow breaths. Don't be afraid."

I'm not, she wants to say, but then the world goes *dark* as her eyes flutter *open*, a peculiar wrongness to match the way the air thickens as she breathes in, clogging her throat. Her lungs inflate even as she's trying to cough, and she gags, lurching upright to claw at the thing that's attached itself to her *face*, oh gods, something has her, she's--she's--

A shrill squealing breaks her out of her panic as her wildly flailing hands dislodge something flimsy from her finger, and even as she chokes, she blinks the familiar-yet-not walls of a hospital room into focus. *Slow breaths*, she remembers, trying to still her racing heart as a pair of nurses come charging into the room, slapping on the lights and momentarily blinding her.

"Hold on, honey," one of them says, kind but brusque. She touches something clipped to her breast pocket that beeps, then rattles off a short code, waiting to be acknowledged. "I need Dr. McAvoy in A12. And somebody call Dr. Lecter."

She's in the hospital. She's in the hospital and she can't breathe, but she doesn't think that's why the left side of her neck feels like she's been punched. She remembers her dad's arms around her, but there was no comfort in it, not like...not like the hands in her dream, inhuman but so very careful.

There was a man. Two men. One blood-spattered and frantic, one quiet and calm. They asked her something. She's sure she said yes. After that...nothing she can be certain is real. But she's alive, and that...that counts for something.

Until she finds out *how* she's alive, she'll keep her mouth shut and her eyes open. It's worked before, and there's no reason it can't work again.

***

It's early, frost still clinging in patches on the ground, but Will isn't worried about time this morning. A three-day suspension isn't enough to placate Jack, but it's enough that he can't argue or force the investigation he really wants. It amounts to a slap on the wrist, and while

Will can't be sure whether Hannibal's involvement was the deciding factor or not, he can't kid himself and say the review board came to their decision unbiased. They may not be worried about what Hannibal will *do*, but having such a high-profile Other on their roster grants them a lot of cachet, and they wouldn't have been eager to alienate him so soon.

Since his Tuesday classes are somebody else's problem today, he takes his time rolling out of bed, steps outside with the dogs instead of stumbling immediately into the shower. He hasn't quite gotten around to making coffee yet, so he's not at his most alert; it takes him a moment to realize the sleek Bentley purring up the drive is actually coming here.

Predictably the dogs all rush the car, but the instant Hannibal steps out from behind the wheel, they freeze, heads lowering and tails tucking. Heart kicking over with belated adrenaline, Will clicks his tongue to call the pack to heel, but for once they ignore him utterly. He can't believe he never considered this, how the dogs would react to having a predator thrust into their midst, how Hannibal would react to the dogs, but--

Hannibal just stands there, unthreatening, a larger fraction of a smile than usual curling the corners of his mouth. He looks...actually pleased to see the dogs--excited, even--and as Will watches, baffled, he gives a quiet chuff that sounds exactly like one dog telling another, unfamiliar dog that he comes in peace.

Instantly the pack's ears prick forward, acutely interested as Hannibal leans back into the car to pluck something off the dashboard. When he straightens up with a paper bag in hand, he finally deigns to look in Will's direction.

"May I?" he asks, pulling a line of still-connected sausages from the sack, just enough that Will can see them without teasing the pack. "Alana mentioned you had dogs, so I thought it best to come prepared. I swear it's nothing I wouldn't serve you," he adds with a lopsided smile.

"Be my guest," Will says, gesturing at the dogs who now sit, uncertainly wagging their tails. He feels underdressed, standing in his boxers and a thin tee while Hannibal's dressed to the nines as always, the urge to go neaten himself up prickling along the back of his neck. "Why *are* you here?" he asks instead, hoping he doesn't sound as rude as he feels. He's not at his most diplomatic first thing in the morning, or any time, really.

"My apologies for not calling ahead," Hannibal says distractedly, already engrossed in tossing treats to the pack. He looks utterly charmed when Buster, the boldest of the bunch, trots closer to take a bite of sausage directly from his hand. "I only got the news myself an hour ago. Perhaps transporting her there from the hospital triggered something, but Port Haven called: Abigail woke up earlier this morning. I thought perhaps you'd like to go and meet with her together."

Together as in *now*, before Jack can stick his nose in, he'd bet. It's a sentiment he heartily agrees with.

"Let me get my coat," he says, doubly grateful for the peaceful night of sleep he'd gotten. At least he won't be assaulting Hannibal's nose the entire way back to Baltimore.

"There's probably time for pants as well," Hannibal offers, buried laughter bright in his voice.

For a wonder, Will doesn't feel mocked or judged. He just rolls his eyes as he turns for the door, muttering, "Next you're going to insist on a shirt as well."

Hannibal says nothing, but the silent amusement radiating off him follows Will all the way back inside.

"So what was that back there? Do you speak dog now?" Will asks once they're on the road. He's taken a stab at making a good first impression, in clothes freshly-ironed for work and after scrubbing his way through the fastest shower he's ever taken that didn't involve leaving a girl's house in a hurry after her romantic soul-gazing turned unpleasant for both of them. Hannibal hadn't seemed to mind, but he wants to greet Abigail as someone who at least looks respectable, like someone she can trust.

That doesn't mean he's been distracted from Hannibal's odd performance.

"Nothing so precise," Hannibal replies without taking his eyes off the road. He's the most polite driver Will's ever ridden with, signaling at every turn and lane change, always maintaining appropriate distance between him and other drivers. It's the sort of caution Will could only muster if he had contraband in the trunk and didn't dare get pulled over, but on Hannibal it looks like second nature. "I can generally glean a sense of what's being said when someone attempts to communicate with me. It's how I knew my human mother's invitation to return home with her for what it was. But the Lecters kept dogs, and I spent many months trying to understand why I couldn't pick up their language the same way I had my parents'."

Will chuckles, imagining a much younger Hannibal trying out various huffs and woofs while the family dogs wagged their tails indiscriminately, enjoying the attention.

"Dogs, huh?"

"Mm. Horses, as well. My favorite was Cesar; the first time I rode him, it was like flying."

"Fast?"

"He threw me off," Hannibal admits, smiling at Will's startled bark of laughter. "But we learned to trust each other eventually."

"So I guess I won't be asking you to translate for me anytime soon."

"I'm afraid not," Hannibal says with a regretful sigh.

"That's a shame. If I could just *ask* them to leave the weird-looking cats alone, we'd need a lot fewer stitches and baking soda baths."

Hannibal huffs a near-silent laugh, shaking his head. "Much as they might wish to obey, their instincts would likely get the better of them. Best not to ask for promises you know they can't keep."

Will hums in rueful acknowledgement, but the words stick in his mind. It's good advice that doesn't just pertain to his dogs, and he vows to take it to heart.

Port Haven is as picturesque in person as it is in the brochures, surrounded by trees with plenty of room for quiet walks, fresh air, the feel of sunlight on your face. Walking into the front lobby still sends a chill down Will's spine, but places like this always make him uneasy. Even if he didn't worry they'd find some way to capture him like a wild research specimen for study, he's one awkward moment of eye contact away from losing himself to some borrowed psychosis, and try explaining *that* to the orderlies.

It feels less dangerous with Hannibal at his side. If he's sure of anything, it's that Hannibal won't leave him here, and that's not a certainty he's had much of in his life.

The receptionist greets them pleasantly enough, with none of the poorly-hidden speculation of the hospital staff. Maybe she's more used to dealing with Others, or maybe Hannibal's reputation in the psychiatric field makes him more of a known quantity here. She's efficient as she signs them in, has the knack of staring at Will's left eyebrow instead of assaulting him directly with eye contact, and generally upholds every claim made about Port Haven's reputation in the five minutes they're with her.

All that comes crashing down when she adds, "The psychiatrist is already with her, but it's just the initial interview, so you should be fine to go right in."

Will glances sharply at Hannibal, who frowns. "A staff psychiatrist?" Hannibal presses, mouth pursed.

The receptionist frowns as well. "No? It was someone you sent. A, uh...Frederica...?"

"Where?" Will cuts her off through gritted teeth.

Rising abruptly, the receptionist comes around the side of the desk, heels clicking as she stretches her legs in fast, purposeful strides. "This way."

Beside him, Hannibal remains dangerously silent, but for once Will isn't inclined to be the voice of reason. If Freddie Lounds has invaded Abigail's hospital room in chase of a scoop, he's going to be really tempted to let Hannibal fucking *eat* her, poison pen and all.

***

Abigail regards her visitor skeptically, not bothering to school her expression. The woman standing at the foot of her bed wears compassion like a mask, but that's all it is; Abigail knows a faker when she sees one. She's not sure how she even got in, though she just waltzed through the door like she had every right to be here, and Abigail knows a convincing show of confidence can get you pretty far.

"So you're not a doctor, a nurse, *or* a psychiatrist," she says, waiting to hear just what exactly Miss Lounds is. A cop? An investigator? She looks too soft for either of those things, though there's something sharp about her Abigail doesn't trust.

"I'm a journalist," Miss Lounds says, still with that same sympathetic look. "I want to tell the truth. Your truth. Sometimes that involves some deception, but know this. I will never lie to you."

"Sounds like something a liar would say."

Miss Lounds lowers her eyes, but the hardness that washes into and back out of her perfectly earnest expression can't be disguised so easily. "If you tell me what you know, I can help you fill in the blanks," she offers instead.

Abigail nearly scoffs. "How about you tell me what you know instead," she counters. She's spent years helping her dad sell the results of his hunts in town, mostly to tourists who don't know the value of anything and always offer low. She knows how to bargain, thank you very much.

Another fast flicker of eyes, and 'Call me Freddie' changes tactics again, but this time Abigail *feels* it.

"Your dad was the Minnesota Shrike," Miss Lounds says, matter-of-fact, but she doesn't stop there. "Your mother wasn't the first person your father killed."

She tries to steel her expression, but it's abruptly hard to swallow, hard to breathe around the lump growing steadily in her throat. She's told the nurses she doesn't remember anything, but she does. She remembers every second of that morning. Her mom and dad both going inexplicably still at the breakfast table, her mother's eyes flying to her dad's as if she'd *known*. All Abigail had been able to do was sit there, confused and startled, as her mom demanded, 'What *is* that?" As if she'd felt something coming. As if her father were somehow responsible. Only Abigail hadn't felt anything, not even a flicker.

"He killed eight girls," Freddie goes on, her voice soft but her words pointed as knives, like the one her mother had lunged for first, only her dad had gotten there quicker. "Eight girls that looked--"

"Just like me," Abigail interrupts. If she'd hoped saying it herself would make it sting less, it doesn't.

"Yes."

"Why do they call him the Shrike?" She's not deflecting, she just...the word's familiar, but she can't quite place it. Surely she has a right to know, considering it's her dad.

"It's a bird that impales its prey, harvests the organs to eat later," Miss Louds says delicately, as if she doesn't really want to be the one to explain this, but Abigail can see the way her eyes never waver, fixed on her face to soak up every last reaction.

Abigail's own eyes feel hot, but not with unshed tears alone. If she'd been born with a useful boon, like her dad's ability to ghost unseen past any watcher, her mother's uncanny knack for finding anything that didn't want to be found, she might have incinerated Miss Lounds on the spot with the force of her glare alone.

"He was very sick," Freddie says at last, eyeing her with a pity that actually seems unfeigned.

It shakes her, picks at fears she's had for longer than she cares to admit. Her family has always been devout, maybe a little too much so. The boons her parents have aren't--weren't--*normal*, and though it seems to have skipped her somehow, that strangeness is still in her blood. If those god-touched gifts were what drove her father crazy in the end....

"Does that mean I'm sick too?"

"You'll be fighting that perception," Freddie warns, coming around the corner of the bed at last to perch on the edge of the mattress. "Perception is the most important thing in your life right now."

Abigail shakes her head impatiently. "I don't care what anybody thinks."

"You'd better start caring, Abigail," Freddie insists, leaning closer. "What you remember, what you tell everyone is going to define the rest of your life. Let me help you."

It shouldn't tempt her, but she's not a fool. She knows she *needs* help, even if this isn't the person she should be looking for it from. But who else does she have? A voice from a dream? If she could cross over into the dream-realm, she might place more faith in half-remembered promises, but she's so utterly normal she even bores herself.

"How did they catch him?" she asks to buy herself some time, space to think.

Freddie stills, and when she replies it's a little more quickly than before, as if she's suddenly noticed the time. "A man named Will Graham. Works for the FBI but isn't FBI," she explains as the door comes open at her back without a knock. "He catches insane men because he can think like them. Because he is insane," she adds as she casts a glance over her shoulder, rising with the caution of someone who wants to face danger on her feet.

The man who steps in first doesn't look like anything special. He has the shaggy hair of someone who doesn't care about fashion or the latest trends, wears thick-rimmed glasses and the suit of an English professor. His face as he stares Freddie Lounds down is utterly blank and utterly familiar; the last time she'd seen it, he was crouching over her, trying to keep her blood in her body with his shaky hands.

"Would you excuse us, please?" he asks Miss Lounds in a terrifyingly calm voice. As he steps closer, Miss Lounds takes a few calculated steps away, never quite letting him within arm's reach. If he notices, he ignores it.

"I'm Special Agent Will Graham," he introduces himself, his eyes sliding past Abigail's own to settle on her right ear.

"By Special Agent, he means not really an agent," Freddie pipes up, half-turning to look back at Abigail as she does. "He didn't get past the screening process.

"Too unstable," she shoots at Graham himself.

A second man had followed Graham in, but Abigail only notices him when he shifts to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Graham. He's only a little taller, but he has a sense of presence that fills the entire room. Where Graham looks like the fun slacker teacher everyone likes, this other man is sharp, controlled, carries himself like someone used to getting his own way.

"I really must insist you leave the room," he tells Miss Lounds, an unfamiliar accent softening the edges of his words, but gods, Abigail *knows* that voice. A little more human, a little less deep, but it's the voice from her dream, the voice of the man who stepped in at the end and held her together until the ambulance arrived.

"If you wanna talk," Freddie says quickly, turning back again to Abigail with a business card in hand, "give me a call. You'll need someone on your side once people realize you've bound yourself to one of the Thousand." Her eyes cut back to Graham's partner, who stands very still: not rigid but ready, a hunter about to strike.

Graham snatches the card away from Miss Lounds before she can hand it over, but Abigail barely notices. This man? He's an Other? One of the Mother's children? He doesn't look anything like she'd pictured, but coupled with what she remembers of the nurses' talk this morning, there's only one man it could be.

She's spent years listening to her father's grumbling about using the Mother's gifts for vanity, but unless he intends to kill her and display her corpse, having Hannibal Lecter in her corner sounds like the greatest boon the universe could have offered her on such short notice.

Chapter 13

Will doesn't relax until Freddie Lounds leaves the room, the orderly the receptionist collected on their way taking her by the arm to escort her out. Pocketing Freddie's business card, he pulls off his glasses and tucks them away too, hoping to hide the fact that he can't quite meet Abigail's eyes. He'd like to--most people read avoidance as guilt--but he hasn't quite gotten a lid on his fury yet, and he's too rattled to muster his defenses.

Abigail hasn't taken her eyes off Hannibal, and that...that worries him. A lot. He can only hope they've gotten here before Freddie had time to put her own sensationalist spin on things. Hannibal doesn't deserve her fear.

"Abigail," he says gently, trying to draw her attention back to him. "This is Dr. Lecter."

"I know," Abigail says with a tremulous smile. "You're kind of famous."

Hannibal inclines his head, amused. "I am. And your family were devoted to my Mother, yes?"

She nods twice, a third time, smile jerking briefly wider. She seems torn between embarrassment and nerves, like a budding technophysicist having a chance encounter with Stephen Hawking.

"Do you remember us?" Will asks hesitantly. She's only been awake for a couple of hours, nowhere near long enough to process what's happened to her, but he doesn't see how they can have this conversation without talking about all the rest of it as well.

Her smile fades as she turns back to him, a complicated snarl of emotions tightening her expression. "I remember you. You killed my dad."

He doesn't know what to say. It's an accusation without heat but also without absolution. He can't blame her for that; it's too soon for forgiveness, even with what happened to her and what she must have guessed since. All he can do is nod, voice lost to the silence that follows.

"You've been in bed for days, Abigail," Hannibal steps in smoothly. "Why don't we have a walk?"

It's framed as a suggestion, but Abigail doesn't argue. She looks pale and terribly young as she musters a shaky nod, all her courage momentarily exhausted.

Hannibal tilts forward in that conspiratorial way he has of drawing people in, adding, "And if you'd like a change from hospital scrubs, check the armoire. I had to ask the IC staff for help with your sizes; I hope you don't mind."

Abigail shakes her head, startled but grateful.

Will clears his throat. "We'll just, uh...step outside, then. Should we call in someone to help?"

"No. Thanks," she adds quickly, voice firming, "but I'm fine."

He's not sure whether she's trying to convince him or herself, but there's determination in the stubborn set of her chin that he's not inclined to argue with.

Out in the hallway, Will slumps back, his shoulders hitting the wall with a thud as the breath gusts out of him. "Is it too early to say whether the Lounds crisis has been averted?"

"Much," Hannibal commiserates as he joins Will. Though he maintains his perfect posture, Will appreciates the solidarity nonetheless. "Fortunately Miss Lounds has failed to appreciate just how devout my Mother's worshippers can be."

"You mean she should have left on a crack about the Bureau's pet psychopath, not the living symbol of her god?"

"It would have been advisable," Hannibal says grimly. He looks about to speak but thinks better of it, eyes fixed on the opposite wall but lost in thought.

Will grimaces. He shouldn't even be thinking like this; he's human, with perfectly reasonable human values and beliefs...but Hannibal isn't. Fair's fair.

"Look," he says, shaking his head a little even as he leans in closer. "You've put up with my questions and general lack of tact. If you've got something to say, don't hold it in on my account."

Hannibal's gaze is assessing, even as it politely skirts Will's eyes. "It's a new month," Hannibal says carefully.

"It is."

"I'm due another tithe."

"You are." He feels like that should be harder to say. It's someone's *life* he's talking about. The sheer unpleasantness of the people Hannibal usually targets shouldn't matter at all. "But you hardly need my input for that."

"On the contrary, you might be well within your rights to demand it. I believe it's traditional to begin with childhood tormenters and work one's way out from there. More to the point, I fear it might be unwise to start silencing reporters at this juncture."

"It might look like we have something to hide?" Though he sees Hannibal's point, the words taste bitter in his mouth. They shouldn't, and he wonders if Jack isn't right about him, whether he is indeed a bad influence on Hannibal. As far as he knows, Hannibal's kills have never been personal; he's never used the tithe as the weapon of spite he's all but admitted others have wielded it as. And yet it's this one, this most personal of targets, Will finds he could forgive with the right provocation.

"Unfortunately, yes. And as we've discussed, some may question why the daughter of a cannibal would ally herself so closely with an Other, particularly of a brood known for indiscriminate appetites. Indeed, Miss Lounds seemed to be implying as much already."

Will huffs, rubbing at a spot over his right eye where he can feel a migraine blossoming already. "You know, they pay me to stop murders. It's kind of what I do. I'm even pretty good at it."

"And yet."

"Aaand yet," Will echoes tiredly, thumping his head back against the wall. "Sorry. I know I should be the voice of restraint here, but that woman seems to bring out the worst in me."

"On the contrary: I find the drive to protect your own to be one of humanity's best features."

Will looks over in surprise, but Hannibal isn't looking at him anymore, back to staring straight ahead at the opposite wall. He's not sure whether he's just been complimented or offered another glimpse into Hannibal's past, but it's heartening to hear Hannibal finds anything in humanity admirable at all.

The companionable silence between them is broken when the door opens on Will's right, Abigail coming out to meet them on wobbly but determined legs. The quick smile she flashes them doesn't quite reach her eyes, but anyone can see she's trying. "Where do you want to go?"

When Will slips a hand under her elbow after a few shaky steps, she doesn't pull away.

The conservatory at the east wing of the hospital is large and well-kept, though there's not much light this late in the year. Fallen leaves dot the glass panes overhead, spangles of yellow and brown an odd contrast to the riotous green of the ferns inside. If the sky weren't so overcast, stepping out onto the garden path would almost feel like summer; as it is, Will's glad Abigail thought to bundle up in a coat.

"I'm sorry we couldn't save your mother," Will says at last. He can't quite bring himself to apologize for her father; even if they could have taken the man alive, by Hannibal's own admission, his days were numbered. "We did everything we could, but she was already gone."

"I know," Abigail says with a hitch in her voice, shaking her head a little. "I saw him kill her."

Damn. He'd hoped she'd been spared that at least.

Reaching a bench tucked in amongst the potted plants, he helps ease her down onto it with a careful hand. After weeks in bed, she's weak and easily tired, but he knows from experience that just getting up and moving around will feel better in the long run.

"He was loving right up until the second he wasn't," she says abruptly. The bitterness in her tone tells him he's not the only one she's not yet ready to forgive. "He kept telling me he was sorry, to just...hold still. He was gonna make it all go away."

"There was plenty wrong with your father, Abigail," Will says carefully, "but there's nothing wrong with you." She looks up at him, eyes swimming with doubt that twists his heart. "You

say he was loving. I believe it. That's what you brought out in him."

"It's not all I brought out in him," she says, voice husky with unshed tears. "I'm gonna be messed up, aren't I? I'm worried about nightmares."

"We'll help you with the nightmares," Hannibal reassures her, speaking up again at last. So far he's been hanging back and letting Will take point, but with that promise Abigail's eyes fix on him with so much naked hope, even Will finds himself believing Hannibal can somehow keep bad dreams at bay.

Will lowers himself down slowly to sit beside her. He's ready to back off at once if she seems uncomfortable with his presence, but she's shaken enough she's probably ready to grasp at any hint of support. "There's no such thing as getting used to what you experienced. But you won't have to face it alone. This may not be the best time to discuss it, but...before the ambulance arrived. Before he stepped in, Dr. Lecter asked you a question. Do you remember what it was?"

Abigail frowns, shaking her head, then adds, "I know I said yes, but that's all I remember. Why?"

"There's a custom among Others," Hannibal replies, taking up the explanation, for which Will is grateful. "The formation of a lasting bond that requires the assistance of an outside party. The conditions to initiate it are very specific, too specific to ever be triggered by chance...or so I had believed.

"In saving your life, Will and I fulfilled those conditions purely by happenstance. Unfortunately there are no provision for acts of circumstance or misunderstandings, and as is becoming clear," he adds with a trace of chagrin and a glance at Will, "the bond is less a matter of empty tradition than I thought. What I asked before I laid hands on you was whether you were willing to bear witness to that bond."

Comprehension has been slowly dawning in Abigail's ever-widening eyes--not a surprise, perhaps, given the devoutness of her family and her upbringing. "And I said yes."

Hannibal inclines his head. "And you said yes. As our bond witness, your happiness and safety are of the utmost importance to us, Abigail. If there's anything we can do to make this easier for you, you've only to ask."

Overwhelmed, she searches Hannibal's face for a long moment before she purses trembling lips and takes a deep breath. "I want to go home," she says, voice wobbling dangerously even as she lifts her chin.

Hannibal looks to Will, but whether he's looking for an objection or agreement is impossible to say. Hannibal's the psychiatrist; surely he has a better idea of what the safest course would be.

"Well, then," Hannibal says after a moment. "Perhaps that can be arranged."

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"So," Will says as they step out into the late morning chill, the sky a hazy white sheet above the grey trees that ring Port Haven's manicured lawns. "Not counting the abysmal beginning, that went better than I expected."

He'd come prepared for furious accusations, for a cold shoulder and silent glares, for Abigail to hate him on sight. It hadn't quite occurred to him that Hannibal might prove the bigger distraction. It should have. All questions of species aside, he's dimly aware the man has some sort of cult following, that there are people out there who are obsessed with his displays, the majority of them human. All he can say is that somehow, over cups of coffee and long car rides and sickroom vigils, he's become complacent. Instead of a dangerous enigma, Hannibal has simply become a friend.

"Indeed. And even that could have gone worse were we a little less prompt in our arrival. I must admit, I expected more of Port Haven's security, but Miss Lounds does have a reputation for being resourceful."

"Unfortunately well-deserved. We should probably--"

He doesn't question it when Hannibal's head comes up, relaxed expression sharpening. There's little else to give him away--this isn't the icy intent he'd shown in the hospital while stalking Stammets--but Will's starting to recognize Hannibal's hunting behaviors, and this is miles removed from the almost playful curiosity he's allowed to peek through in the past.

Following Hannibal's line of sight, he's appalled but unsurprised to find Freddie Lounds leaning against the front of Hannibal's car, beaming like she's actually pleased to see them.

"Special Agent Graham," she greets him with a winning smile as she steps away from the car, coming forward with her hand outstretched. "I never formally introduced myself. I'm Freddie Lounds."

He pulls his glasses out of his jacket and slips them back on, but this time it's less of a distraction and more of a deterrent. He wants the barrier, however flimsy; the thought of seeing what's inside this woman leaves him feeling vaguely unclean. "Are you trying to salvage this joke from the mouth of madness?"

She drops her hand with no visible trace of embarrassment, her welcoming tone traded on the spot for warm sincerity. Why she's wasting her time with tabloid journalism, he has no idea; she clearly missed her calling on the stage. "Please, let me apologize for my behavior in there. It was sloppy and misguided. And hurtful," she adds, as if suddenly realizing it's not her *technique* he has issues with.

"Miss Lounds," Hannibal interrupts. His voice is as even as ever, but Hannibal raising his voice is no doubt a sign of the apocalypse. "Now is not the time."

Freddie eyes him strangely, poised somewhere between outrage at being interrupted and waiting for the other shoe to drop. When Hannibal remains silent, all the threats he could easily make left unvoiced, Freddie seems to take that as permission to ignore him.

"Look," she says, turning back to Will, "you and I may have our own reasons for being here, but I also think we both genuinely care what happens to Abigail Hobbs."

"You told her I was *insane*."

"I can undo that," she offers quickly. The truly maddening thing is that she looks like she actually believes it.

Oh, he mouths silently, starting to get the picture. "You help Abigail see me as more than her father's killer, and I help you with...online ad sales?"

"I can undo what I said," Freddie repeats coolly. "But I can also make it a lot worse."

Just behind his right shoulder, Hannibal tenses--not enough to draw Freddie's notice, but Will can feel the shift in the air, the heavy sense of presence Hannibal always radiates gathering weight and purpose. He knows Hannibal's on the verge of stepping forward, throwing his own hat into the ring, but Will's far too furious to be robbed of his target now.

"Miss Lounds," he says, biting out each word as if he could tear literal strips from her thick skin. "It's not very smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living."

Her expression doesn't change, even with him staring a hole in the center of her forehead, and most people who know anything about him would flinch from the chance of meeting his eyes. It's like she intends to use her sheer unpleasantness as a shield, and if she's done her homework, she's doing exactly that.

"Neither is threatening someone who writes about them," she replies with a tight, insincere smile. "If you change your mind, give me a call. You have my number," she reminds him, miming holding out a business card as she saunters away.

He refuses to watch her go, glaring straight ahead and taking one deep, steadying breath after another. He's met some disagreeable people in his line of work, but rarely has he met anyone so unapologetically mercenary in the face of others' trauma. She's the kind of person who wouldn't just stop to take pictures if someone got stabbed in front of her; she'd also try to interview the victim before even considering calling for help.

"Will?" Hannibal asks after a moment, reminding him he's not alone. "Would you like to reconsider our stance on the press?"

He's startled into a laugh, but it's devoid of humor. "Gods, don't tempt me. I didn't like that woman's style of journalism even before I was the target of it. Seeing her focused on Abigail is just...."

"I agree, but I'm concerned for you as well. As you've said, people with extraordinary abilities make good copy. Now that she's aware of you, I imagine her attacks will only escalate."

"It's fine," Will says tiredly, pulling off his glasses and rubbing at his eyes. "I've been ignoring that kind of gossip all my life, and there's a limit to how far she can go before she

gets slapped with a libel suit."

"Then we'll simply have to endeavor not to give her the ammunition...unless, of course, we *want* her to hang herself."

With her own tongue, flashes instantly through Will's mind, complete with the accompanying grisly image: an empty courtroom--a place of truth--where a slim body hangs, swaying gently, head tipped back and mouth open for the biggest story hook of her career.

He shakes his head, driving the image away. Some tiny part of him wishes he could blame it on proximity, a chance moment of eye contact with the killer standing beside him, but he won't put that on Hannibal. He knows himself too well for that.

"She'll manage that on her own sooner or later. In the meantime, we've got more important things to worry about."

"Abigail's wish to go home."

"And Jack's reaction when he realizes she's awake. And that we saw her and didn't interrogate her," he adds, mouth twisting in distaste. "If he hears she wants to return to the scene of the crime, he'll probably drive her there himself."

"You think it's a poor idea?" Hannibal asks, tilting his head a fraction to the side as he waits with evident interest for Will's answer.

"I mean, you're the expert," Will hedges, tempted to backtrack out of habit, fear of embarrassment. Experience tells him he's being set up, except Hannibal doesn't lay those types of traps. "She did only just wake up. Won't going back there be hard on her?"

"Yes," Hannibal says frankly. "And ordinarily I'd counsel much more caution. I only worry that Jack's continuing obsession will prove problematic. Perhaps between the two of us, with Abigail's help, we can discover enough to put Jack's suspicions to rest."

Will arches a brow, reluctantly intrigued. "I read the scene and you sniff out any clues I might miss?"

"Precisely. And with us there for support, it's my hope Abigail will be able to work through some of her trauma rather than adding to it. It would require some delicate balancing, of course, but I believe it could benefit her in the long run to see that place again through the eyes of a survivor, not a victim."

Will takes a breath and blows it out on a sigh. "You do present a convincing argument, Doctor," he admits. "It's a moot point, though, if Jack decides to try and keep her here instead."

"Then our first step is a visit to the Bureau?"

Will's stomach takes that moment to audibly growl, reminding him that breakfast had been forgotten in their rush to get to Port Haven first.

Hannibal smiles. "Our second step, perhaps. Could I interest you in brunch?"

"That...would be great; thank you," Will says, one hand resting sheepishly on his stomach as if to muffle any further outcry from that direction. "Facing Jack on an empty stomach is probably a bad idea."

"We can call him after," Hannibal assures him, radiating satisfaction as he starts again for the car.

As it happens, they needn't have planned so far ahead. Jack calls Will within the hour.

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"'It isn't very smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living,'" Agent Crawford reads aloud from the article up on his screen, each word uttered like a sentence of guilt. Miss Lounds, it seems, has been busy this morning. "You know what else isn't very smart?" he adds, turning this time to Hannibal as Will looks away and down, chastened but furious. "You were there with him, and you let those words come out of his mouth."

Hannibal maintains his neutral expression, but it's a struggle. A century ago, Jack might have had a point, but a century ago, his marriage to Will would have been a scandal far surpassing Hannibal's perceived inability to keep his 'chattel' in line. "I trust Will to speak for himself."

"Evidently you shouldn't."

"They did divert her attention from Abigail Hobbs," Alana says on Will's right. She may well share Jack's dim view of Will's hasty words, but she's maintained her philosophical outlook since her arrival, no doubt realizing Jack had invited her solely to play them off against each other.

"Well, then it's a victory," Jack agrees sarcastically.

Hannibal can almost empathize with him. Agent Crawford has an office to represent, can't afford to let loose words reach the wrong ears--or the wrong pen.

Then Will sighs out a deep, defeated breath on his right, and he feels the compass needle of his sympathies swinging back, unbidden and unconsidered, to the man at his side.

"So Abigail Hobbs is awake," Jack continues after a long, silent moment. "I don't suppose either of you managed to ask her anything pertinent when you rushed to her bedside?"

"I don't think I'm allowed to do that while I'm on suspension," Will drawls, rallying once more.

"And I believe I was hired as a consultant, not a freelancer," Hannibal adds, blatantly following his husband's lead, still stung by Jack's rebuke for not forcing the opposite.

On Will's other side, Alana shifts in her chair. He knows her well enough to know she's fighting not to laugh.

"She did make a request," Will offers just before Jack's building anger can spike to unpleasant levels. "She said she wanted to go home."

Brows drawing in thoughtfully, Jack sits back in his chair. "Did she."

Straightening, Alana uncrosses her legs, eyes darting between them. "Jack," she says warningly, though she's staring at Will. "Not yet. She hasn't--has she even been evaluated? Talked to anyone in a professional capacity?"

"Port Haven has many skilled doctors on their roster," Hannibal replies with a glance to Will. Will nods, apparently still in agreement with what they discussed over brunch. "However, we wanted to ask you if you'd be willing to take Abigail on as your patient. In light of Miss Lounds' behavior today, we'd both rest easier knowing Abigail was in the hands of someone we trust."

Flattered surprise edges out concern for a moment, but then, predictably, Alana's determination returns twofold. "Then you have to know I wouldn't advise this at all. What Abigail wants and what she needs are different things. Taking her out of a controlled environment would be reckless."

"Did she seem unstable to you, Doctor?" Jack cuts in, pointedly directing the question--and the title--to Hannibal.

"No more so than anyone in her situation," Hannibal replies thoughtfully. "Considering her upbringing, she may have a more...nuanced view of her father's actions than someone from a less devout family."

Will turns his head to stare at him incredulously, but it's Alana who speaks.

"Nuanced? I'm not sure how you could find anything nuanced in--"

She stops abruptly, mouth snapping shut with a quiet click of teeth.

Hannibal nods. "The entire Hobbs family were consecrated to my Mother. In the right season, in the right time and place, any one of their deaths could have been interpreted as a sacrifice."

What he's failed to mention, but will have to explain eventually, is that the ways in which the three of them were dedicated were different. Garret Jacob Hobbs and his wife, much like Hannibal's aunt, had both had some diluted trace of Otherness still clinging to their blood. In them the consecration would have been read as a declaration of loyalty, affiliation.

Abigail, entirely human, was as good as given from the moment she was marked.

Alana shakes off her surprise quickly. "Still. Knowing some nebulous future might involve your own sacrifice is hardly the same as being the victim of a murder attempt. You take her home, she may experience intense emotions, respond aggressively, or re-enact some aspect of the traumatic event without even realizing it."

Will at least looks like he's starting to lean toward Alana's point of view, but Jack remains unconvinced. "And where do you weigh in on this, Dr. Lecter? What made you decide it was

worth the risk?"

"Closure," he replies without missing a beat. "The beginnings of it for Abigail and hopefully the end of it for the families of the victims. If we can discern her father's motives for abducting those girls, perhaps Abigail can stop feeling his madness was something she inspired--and you will have no further reason to investigate her as an accomplice."

Jack narrows his eyes. "Now, hold on there. You yourself said she might have had the threat of becoming a sacrifice hanging over her head. I'd say trying to avoid that by throwing other girls in front of the knife is a pretty strong motive."

"Only if it turns out those girls were, in fact, sacrificed. And even then, I would argue it's possible she could have remained in the dark. Up until the day of his death, Abigail had a devoted father who cared for her very much. One rarely looks for the monster inside one's own family, Agent Crawford, especially when the monster loves you."

He knows he'll carry his point simply because Jack wants him to. He merely hopes Will won't question his insistence too closely. He's not worried that his own subtle manipulations of the events at the Hobbs house will be discovered; he worries that Jack is right, that those girls' bodies all found their way to an altar somewhere, and that Abigail will be taken from them, placed out of their reach. It shouldn't matter; so long as she remains among the living, her incarceration would have no effect on the bond between himself and Will, and her status as *his* bond witness should guarantee no Other would dare to accept the boon of her death as part of their tithe.

But it does matter. He'd felt no drawing of power at the time, but the most ancient of magics can be fickle like that, so deeply carved into the fabric of the world, they're breathed in like air. One only knows one has been snared after the trap has been sprung.

Crawford glances back to Alana, but she remains silent. Unhappy, certainly, but she seems willing to rest her case, realizing there's more at stake than a professional difference of opinion. Perhaps she merely trusts him enough to believe he has his reasons.

Jack spreads his hands. "Then it seems we have the same agenda, at least to a point. Therefore, I am going to choose the opinion that best suits my agenda."

Alana stares over Jack's shoulder with a minute headshake, and even Will looks troubled, but Hannibal feels nothing but satisfaction. He doubts very much that his kin would have left anything behind of the unlooked-for tithes they may have been offered, but he can make certain of it. He can make certain of *them*.

No more loose ends. It's been too long since he hunted last anyway.

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The coffee shop Freddie chooses to meet him in is one of those trendy places that tries for a modern look and ends up a dead ringer for an airport waiting lounge. She doesn't care about the décor; the impersonal touch to their surroundings will only highlight the sincerity she wants to convey.

Nicholas Boyle sits hunched at the table he chose like a lost boy, pale and angular, sullen in his silence. He looks like a kid playing at being a tough guy in his dark jacket, the childish mop of his wavy red hair doing him no favors. When she places a cup of coffee on a matching white saucer down in front of him, he doesn't even look up.

"Thanks again for meeting with me," she says softly as she sits down across from him. "I know this hasn't been easy for you."

"Oh, yeah?" he challenges, still glaring a hole in the table as he takes a sip from his cup. "How would you know?"

"I've been writing about Garret Jacob Hobbs," she explains with a self-effacing shrug. "I've spoken to the relatives of some of his other victims."

Her choice of words makes him look up at last, impotent fury sparking in his eyes. His sister wasn't Hobbs' victim, as it happens; knowing she was just collateral must be eating him up inside. "Hobbs is dead. He deserved a lot worse. Him and his whole family."

"There must be some small comfort knowing that justice was served," she says, fishing a little. It's unlikely whatever admiration he might have felt would have survived longer than his sister, but the starstruck reverence in which some people hold Hannibal Lecter has been known to survive worse.

Nicholas' eyes flick up to meet hers though his chin remains tucked to his chest. "Comfort?" he demands. "My sister was impaled on a severed stag head, cut down the middle. Lecter pulled out her lungs while she was still breathing. There's no comfort in that."

"I'm sorry. I am. But you have to try not to remember her that way."

She's no grief counselor, but she's pretty sure platitudes like that are never the way to go.

Nicholas shifts impatiently but doesn't immediately rise and stalk away. "What do you want from me?" he snaps, staring her dead in the eye.

Jury's still out on whether it's good or bad that he's smart enough to know there's *something*. It at least means she can cut to the chase.

"I just thought you should know Abigail Hobbs came out of her coma. Dr. Lecter must be so relieved; she was the one he was trying to save, after all."

Nicholas freezes, wheels upon wheels turning in his head as he slowly sits up.

She doesn't smile, doesn't even look up from her own coffee as she lifts the cup to her lips. She hasn't met many--usually only meets half of a pair, in her line of work--but she's seen how bonded couples act over their bond witnesses. She knows exactly what Lecter's next step will be. He's going to bury this story--*her* story--long before the mileage on it should have worn out.

It's a nice try, but the thing about stories like these is that it's so easy for them to take on a life of their own. All it takes is a push in the right direction, and brand new chapters practically

write themselves.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Abigail's never flown before, but she's too nervous to enjoy it. She's also too distracted to be afraid. Maybe that's a blessing in disguise.

It's not just her and Dr. Lecter and Agent Graham. They also brought a friend, a pretty, put-together woman with a calm voice and a permanently thoughtful expression. Dr. Bloom is supposed to be her shrink from now on, hand-picked to keep her therapy notes from being leaked online. She seems nice enough, but Abigail's not sure how she feels about spilling her guts to a stranger, especially a stranger who's a close personal friend of her new guardians.

She's not sure how she feels about having guardians, either, but at least they're on her side.

She knows exactly how she feels about the possibility that might change.

The flight is long, but at least it's comfortable. She's not sure what kind of tickets the FBI had sprung for, but Hannibal swept in and got all four of them upgraded while Agent Graham's back was turned, and now they're all flying first class. Dr. Bloom had laughed into her fist, clearly used to both Hannibal's behavior and Agent Graham's knee-jerk instinct to argue when he finds out. It's clear Hannibal likes to throw his money around--the clothes he'd gotten her were *not* cheap--but he's nice about it, almost secretive. When she'd tried to thank him for her new wardrobe, he'd only asked if she liked them, like that was the most important thing.

He'd gotten her scarves. Enough to wear a different one with every outfit in her closet. She hadn't even had to ask.

Agent Graham sits with her on the plane, giving her the window seat so he can post himself between her and the rest of the world. In the seats behind them, Hannibal and Dr. Bloom quietly discuss an upcoming conference, an article recently published by a colleague. The soothing, familiar rumble of Hannibal's voice coaxes her to close her eyes at last, and for a few peaceful hours, she sleeps. If she dreams, she remembers none of them when she wakes.

"We called ahead," Agent Graham informs her when they're only a few blocks away from her house. Behind the wheel of their rented SUV, Hannibal glances at him attentively. "Bloomington PD knows we're coming, but everything's been quiet. No reporters, no cameras."

From her seat behind Hannibal, Abigail dredges up a nervous smile and nods. It's a weight off her mind, but only one among many.

She's going home, but home will never be the same again.

She wants to watch as they pull into the drive, wants to see those familiar windows and her own front door, but all she can remember is the slam of it after her father pushed her mother out, turning to her with a wild light in his eyes. She fumbles automatically with her seatbelt when she hears everyone else do the same, only then realizing that they've parked. It's like the whole world is shrouded in shadows, even though she knows it's just gone mid-afternoon, the sun as bright as it's going to get this late in the year.

Dr. Bloom sucks in a sharp breath on her right, sitting up straight. If she's going to tell Abigail again that she doesn't have to do this, Abigail doesn't want to hear it.

Slipping out of the car, she takes five quick steps and slows, half-disbelieving what she's seeing. Someone has tagged her--no. Someone has *defaced* her house, 'CANNIBALS' scrawled in bold black spray paint across the garage door, the front door, the siding under the windows.

She knows what they've been saying about her dad. She hadn't known they were saying it about *her*.

Before anyone can decide she shouldn't be here, she pulls herself together and forces herself forward, step by deliberate step. The front porch is as empty as she'd expected, but almost entirely clean; there's only a faded red shadow in the concrete to prove anything terrible ever happened here.

"Is this where my mom died?" she asks, even though she knows.

"Yes," Agent Graham says. He's approaching her slowly, like he would a wounded animal.

"I was sort of expecting a body outline in chalk or tape," she admits, trying to laugh off her own naivety, but it just comes out shaky.

"They only do that if you're still alive," Agent Graham says carefully, "and taken to the hospital before they finish the crime scene."

So her mom really hadn't had *any* chance, had she? Even if Abigail had been able to move, had ducked past her dad and rushed out to help, it would have been too late. She knows her memory is probably faulty, that nothing was quite as rushed as she remembers it--just one fast smear of terror and pain and sudden, deafening noise--but she knows it was quick. Never let them suffer. That's what her dad always said. If you took too long, it tainted the--

"Goodbye, mom," she chokes out, eyes hot and stinging. She won't cry, though. Not yet. Not until she's seen it all.

The hospital gave her back her keys for the trip out here; she doesn't want to think too closely on why they're going to want them back when she returns. It's not like she can explain that she's not a risk, that she *knows* she'll choose to keep living, every time, whatever it takes. That she doesn't want to hurt anyone, not even herself, but if the choice is her or them...?

She unlocks the door, pushes it open, and steps inside.

With the first breath she takes, *home* reaches out and wraps her up in the scent of wood shavings, faint animal musk, and her mother's perfume. That last is weak, barely present, but she can smell it still: jasmine and something like the taste of rain.

Inside, everything is the same, but everything is different. The furniture sits at the same precise angles, but the table by the door is stacked with boxes that have evidence stickers on the front and sides. The same mounted heads that have greeted her for years still hang on the wall, a buck and a doe sharing a double plaque like siblings, but the larger stag head mounted beside them is slightly off-kilter, like it'd been removed and rehung.

She bypasses the stairs that lead down into the den in the half-submerged second floor and enters the place of half her nightmares, trying to keep her trembling bones from rattling right out of her skin.

There's more evidence boxes in here, on the kitchen table now shoved against the wall and stacked by the door to the pantry. For a moment she can't breathe, her eyes seeing somewhen else, but then she blinks and sees what's really there. What really *isn't* there.

It looks...normal. Empty. The floors look clean enough to eat off of, which she's never going to be able to hear again without feeling a little sick. Someone even did the dishes and put them away. That was nice of them.

There's no blood. Her father isn't there.

"If you ever wanna go, you just have to say so and we'll go," Dr. Bloom tells her earnestly. She gets the feeling Dr. Bloom is earnest about a lot of things.

"Go where?" she asks, bitterness coiling in her gut. "The hospital?"

"For now," Hannibal steps in before Dr. Bloom can reply. "But certainly not forever. We can discuss your future options when you've had a chance to think about what you want."

What she wants? She wants her dad not to have been a murderer, for everything to go back to the way it was a year ago, before she ever mentioned leaving home. She doesn't say that, though, because she knows there's a limit--there's *always* a limit to what wishing can do--and it wouldn't be respectful, anyway. Her dad might not have liked Dr. Lecter, but he'd have been appalled if she backtalked any child of the Mother, even this one.

"They turned all the pictures around," she says instead, examining the photos pinned to the fridge with colorful magnets.

"Crime scene cleaners will do that," Dr. Bloom explains. Abigail wonders how she knows; she'd thought Dr. Bloom was just another psychiatrist.

"They did a really good job," she says with studied casualness, eyeing this neat, clean kitchen that's starting to feel just a little bit unreal. There's just...nothing to see here. Everyone move along. Did any of it really happen if there's no proof? "Is that where all my blood was?" she asks, eyes catching on the gold-marbled linoleum in front of the sink.

"Yes."

It's the first time Agent Graham's spoken since entering the kitchen, since the day he shouted at Dr. Lecter to do something, at her father to announce his arrival, then opened fire. She turns on him sharply, and gods, she's just so furious--formless and fierce, at too many things to name even one--but she puts on a pleasant smile, because that's what a good daughter would do. "You do this a lot? Go places and think about killing?"

"Too often." He looks tired, a little hollow. Not at all like a hero who brought down a monster and saved the day.

"So you pretended to be my dad?" She's pushing, she knows she's pushing, but-- *Because he can think like them*. That's what that Lounds woman had said. She's probably dumb for taking it literally, but if it's true....

"And...people like your dad," Graham hedges, trying to spare her feelings, maybe.

She doesn't care about those others, though. She only wants to know one thing.

"What did it feel like? To be him?" she asks, too much pleading in her tone. She hates that she asks, but she just needs to hear it, just once.

"It feels like...I'm talking to his shadow suspended on dust," Graham says hesitantly, like he's groping for words.

A crushing weight of disappointment descends instantly on her shoulders. That...that wasn't what she'd wanted to know at all. She'd just wanted to know *why*. Why kill those girls? Why did they look like her? Did he spare her because he loved her, or did he kill them because secretly, down deep, he hated her that much?

"Sounds like I'm not the only one with nightmares," she says flippantly, but there's no triumph in the dig. He looks like she slapped him, and even through her anger, she hates herself a little. She never used to be cruel. Before *all this*, she'd never had to be.

Turning away, she braces her hands on the counter and tries to calm her racing heart. It's so stupid to feel guilty over hurting the feelings of the man who killed her father, but she knows he's only trying his best.

Graham shifts uncomfortably, but he doesn't back down from reaching out again. She won't admit she's just the tiniest bit relieved. "The attacks on you and your mother were different," he says. "They were desperate. He must've known he was out of time when the story on Cassie Boyle aired--"

Abigail frowns. "No. I mean...he was furious," she admits, turning back and darting a hesitant glance at Hannibal.

"He always said you were too flashy, too...too frivolous with the Mother's gifts," she tells him nervously. She halfway expects him to puff up in outrage at the criticism, but instead one corner of his mouth curls up in a slow smile, amused. "I saw him checking the calendar after

that, but then he just...calmed down." She's not sure why Hannibal shoots Graham an 'I-told-you-so' look at that, and she's not going to ask. "He didn't get *weird* again until that morning, and then it was both of them."

Dr. Bloom frowns. "What do you mean?"

Abigail shakes her head. "I don't know. We were just eating breakfast, and mom and dad...suddenly they both just...stopped. Like when a deer hears a noise in the brush. It was like they both knew something was about to happen, but that wasn't what they *did*. They both had these gifts, but not *that*."

Hannibal tilts his head a fraction to one side, thoughtful. "Can you describe your parents' gifts?"

"Mom, she was a finder. Nothing hidden could hide from her. And dad...he could just turn ghost. It was like your eyes didn't want to see him, even in broad daylight."

Graham stands straighter as if she's just given him the answer to a puzzle, but the corners of Hannibal's mouth tuck in unhappily. "Abigail. Your parents weren't merely gifted. They both carried faint traces of my Mother's blood, so faint even I nearly missed it. But if their gifts were that strong...it appears to be a common trait in hybrids of my blood to be able to sense my approach. I'm told it's not pleasant when I arrive unexpectedly," he says with a tiny grimace. "Usually I call ahead."

She stares, full of too many conflicting feelings to be anything but numb. "So he really was out of time." Help, *rescue*, had been on the way, but her parents had been expecting...something else.

'*It's nothing*,' her father had said, sharp and strained.

'*That is not* nothing. *Were you* rejected? *Tell me you didn't refuse to take a clear fucking hint*--'

She can't tell them that. She can't even breathe a word of that, to anyone. If her father really was sacrificing those girls...if he was sacrificing them *in her place*...no one's ever going to believe she wasn't helping him, that she didn't know.

And her mother...gods, when she went for that knife....

She clasps a hand over her mouth and closes her eyes tight. *Slow breaths*. She's not going to cry. Her parents were already lost to her before this; this doesn't change anything.

"I'm sorry," Hannibal says softly. "If I had known...."

She shakes her head quickly, drawing in a deep breath. "You saved me." She doesn't know why. Probably he hadn't even meant to; he'd been hunting, not mounting a rescue. But he'd been working alongside the FBI--still is--and that has to count for something. "That's why you were here. You couldn't have known he'd...you couldn't have known."

Hannibal looks so downcast, she actually feels sorry for him, and that's...they're trying so hard, both of them, and they don't even know whether she deserves it. They don't know anything about her, but they've already made up their minds. It terrifies her, because what if they find out? But she's grateful, too.

Grateful enough to lift her chin, dash away the beginnings of tears, and force a wobbly smile.

"Well...now that we all need therapy...do you want to see the rest of the house?"

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The Hobbs place is actually much bigger than Will realized at first. From the front, it looks like a one-story, but the stairs he only vaguely remembers glancing down the last time he was here lead to a large den, an entire second story half-sunken into a hill. Sliding glass doors look out onto a wide lawn bordered by trees, spindly saplings sprouting like weeds at the feet of gnarled old growth. It gives the property a wild look that fits all too well with what he now knows about the family.

He really wants to ask more about Abigail's father's gift--it makes so much sense now how Hobbs had been able to sneak Elise Nichols' body back in right under their noses--but he settles for turning to Hannibal instead. "So you've met other...cousins before?" Hopefully ones that didn't end up on the dinner table, though he doubts even Hannibal is polite enough to call ahead for that.

"Once," Hannibal replies as he carries over an evidence box to join the pile Abigail is sorting through, trying to gather up the family photos. "A patient of mine, as it happens. We always had to allow extra time for his sessions to begin; he once likened coming into my office as a mouse walking into the paws of a cat. I believed his ability to sense my proximity was peculiar to him alone, but it appears I was mistaken."

"Why didn't he just choose another doctor?" Abigail asks, looking up at Hannibal curiously from her seat on the floor. Her earlier anger seems to have faded, leaving behind a shy, nervous girl trying very hard to act older than her years.

"He struggled with a particular type of dysphoria I happened to be singularly well-equipped to help him manage. We still talk on occasion--by phone, naturally. I believe he's found work in a museum, when he used to avoid others with the dedication of a wild animal. At the very least, he seems much happier in himself these days."

"Even though he...I mean, if he had a gift, other than the one," Abigail backtracks, staring at the loose stack of photos clutched in both hands. "Was that what made him...?"

Alana leans forward, ducking her head a little to try and catch Abigail's eyes. "Gifted humans aren't any more prone to mental illness than the ungifted. In fact, they're often more resilient than most." She carefully doesn't look at Will as she says it; he wonders which of them she's trying to convince. Maybe he's an outlier and should not have been counted. "A gift can be an uncomfortable thing, but it can also grant a sense of safety and stability."

Abigail looks skeptical until Hannibal adds, "It's not a popular take, but there have been studies which suggest that the majority of humans suffer from at least mild PTSD due to the nature of our species' arrangement. The gifted at least have slightly more tools at hand should the terms of the Compact suddenly become personally relevant."

He doesn't sound troubled by the idea at all, that a human might fight back and *win*, but then again, he wouldn't. If anything, Will gets the feeling that Hannibal would admire the human's resourcefulness.

It doesn't seem to comfort Abigail much, though. "So my dad was just sick, then."

Will frowns. "Abigail...."

"Can you catch somebody's crazy?" Abigail asks in a rush. She won't look at any of them, but Will can see how much this has been worrying her.

"*Folie à deux*," Alana says thoughtfully, unoffended when Abigail turns a very teenaged look of impatient bafflement on her.

"What?"

"It's a French psychiatric term," Alana explains. "Madness shared by two."

He can tell by Abigail's scowl that she still doesn't get it. He'd take his own stab at picking apart the concept, but his own understanding of the phrase might just be a little too literal. At points during the case, he'd barely known where he ended and Hobbs began. On the day he burst into Abigail's life, he'd been so full of a father's love, he'd have promised anything, bargained with the gods themselves, if it meant she'd live. He supposes that's a kind of madness too.

"One cannot be delusional," Hannibal says as he adds another box to the collection, "if the belief in question is accepted as ordinary by others in that person's culture or subculture. Or family."

"My dad didn't seem delusional," Abigail scoffs a trifle defensively. "He was a perfectionist."

"Your dad left hardly any evidence," Will says by way of agreement. Hobbs was meticulous in both his planning and execution, right up until the night he let sentiment get the better of him.

Abigail looks up sharply, a sheen of betrayal in her eyes. "Is that why you let me come home? To find evidence?" she demands, looking from Will to Hannibal.

"It was one of many considerations," Hannibal admits.

That sobers her, but she collects herself swiftly, shaking her head. "You're not gonna find any of those girls, you know."

Will pauses in the act of turning away, surprise overcoming guilt. "What makes you say that?"

Abigail shrugs. "He would honor every part of them. He used to make plumbing putty out of elk's bones. Whatever bones are left of those girls are probably holding pipes together."

She sounds remarkably untroubled by the possibility, but...a hunting family. Devout. A little uncanny, thanks to the parents' gifts. He can't know what their family rituals were like, how they laid their kin to rest or what religious dispensations they might have claimed. Maybe to her that sounds entirely reasonable.

"Where did he make this putty?" Hannibal asks, that familiar, curious intensity coming back into his eyes.

"At the cabin. I can show you tomorrow, but there might not be much to see. He cleaned everything. He said he was afraid of germs, but...I guess he was just afraid of getting caught."

A slight wobble creeps into her voice, breathy since the first mention of the cabin. He can almost picture it: returning there after her fist big kill, only to find another lesson waiting. Blood on her hands, the shine of a knife, as meat becomes meal. The memory shakes her, in a way even returning to the site of her near-death hasn't.

"No one else ever went there with your dad?" he asks mostly in hopes of distracting her, only a little in the interest of making Jack happy. "Except you?"

She shakes her head. Her hands, clutched tight around her little stack of photographs, tremble. "He made everything by himself. Glue, butter.... He sold the pelts on eBay or in town. He made pillows. No parts went to waste. Otherwise it was murder."

Alana shifts restlessly, watching Abigail like a hawk. If she calls a stop to this trip down memory lane, he'll abide by it without question; Jack and his blinkered obsession with finding answers that don't exist can go hang.

He's not prepared for Abigail's face to twist with revulsion, a tiny gasp escaping her. His eyes slide automatically away when she lifts hers to meet his; he can only hear the horror in her tone as he ducks the responsibility of having to share the memories behind it. "He was feeding them to us. Wasn't he?"

"It's...very likely," Hannibal speaks up when Will can't find the words.

She opens her mouth and closes it again, staring into the middle distance. "Before he cut my throat, he told me he killed those girls so he wouldn't have to kill me," she says, speaking in a rapid, high tone that makes her sound years younger.

"You're not responsible for anything your father did, Abigail," Alana tells her, leaning forward to lay a hand on her arm. Friend or not, something about Alana's proximity has Lecter moving forward as well, taking a knee on Abigail's other side.

Abigail doesn't seem to notice. "If he would've just killed me, none of those other girls would be dead."

Alana shakes her head. "We don't know that. Your father--"

"If he'd just killed me, he could have given me to the Mother. He could have just *stopped*, if he'd just killed *me*."

"Abigail," Hannibal rumbles, hesitantly reaching out. Even in his human guise, he keeps his fingers loosely curled, mindful of hidden claws.

When Abigail turns suddenly--into Hannibal, not Alana--and tucks her face against his chest, Hannibal freezes, eyes wide and stunned. The tense line of Alana's mouth softens as she watches them, and she lets her own hand drop without hesitation.

"He said he was sorry," Abigail chokes out, hands curling into fists against the front of Hannibal's suit without quite daring to grab hold. "He said he was *sorry*."

Slowly, as if waiting for Abigail to come to her senses and pull away, Hannibal lifts his arms and wraps them loosely around her. When she sags into his hold, shoulders giving up their tension all at once, he risks tightening his arms, one hand lifting to rest on the back of her head. He still looks slightly mystified, but there's something unfocused in his gaze that Will's only seen when Hannibal's dwelling on his past, his own vanished family.

"It's all right," Hannibal tells her, dropping his head to murmur his reassurances into her hair. "We would have been very sorry never to have met you as well."

That only makes her cry harder, but Will has hope that they're the good kind of tears. She's been acting brave this whole time, keeping it together in the company of agents and shrinks. It has to be a good thing that she's finally letting herself grieve.

Part of him wants to go over there and join them, and this time it doesn't feel like Hobbs' ghost, literal or metaphoric. Instead he lets them be, heart filled with an inexplicable warmth. Hannibal ought to the be the stuff of nightmares, the pinnacle of what Abigail's father only aspired to, but he's so careful with the breakable creature in his arms, Will can't imagine she feels anything but safe.

Maybe he's superfluous here. Hannibal has had nearly everything well in hand from the moment he committed himself to action. But when Hannibal blinks hazy eyes back to the present, it isn't Alana he looks to. His eyes lock with Will's, and for one fleeting second, night falls around him, cool and comforting. Two hands steady his shoulders, preventing him from turning around, even though he's *seen*. He's so bothered by that--Hannibal should have realized by now that Will's not going to turn on him for what he is--that he almost misses the small, soft hand that slides into his own, too tiny to be Abigail's.

He blinks and feels his pupils constrict as daylight comes rushing back, the vision broken as Hannibal drops his eyes to Abigail once more. That was...unexpected--has Hannibal been a father before?--but now's not the time to ask. The thing is, he's pretty sure if he did, Hannibal would tell him.

He only wishes he could believe there's a happy ending to that story.

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It isn't the same. It couldn't possibly be. The child in his arms smells entirely human, nothing like him or his, but the rush of memories it brings back can't be shaken off by logic. It's almost a surprise to learn some part of him has missed *this*, not just the one he used to comfort.

It's one more unexpected thing in a string of unlikely consequences, and he chides himself a little for being surprised. Nothing begun that day has played out in quite the ways he expected. He hadn't anticipated that Hobbs would be able to sense his arrival, much less that his wife would too. He'd thought seeing him would be warning enough, had hung back by the car on purpose to give Hobbs every opportunity to peek outside for a good, long look.

He'd known Hobbs would panic, had been half-anticipating a chase. Agent Graham--prickly, law-abiding, but surprisingly fair-minded--would have forgiven him for following his instincts in the heat of the moment. There'd also been the possibility that Hobbs would strike at last, and he'd spent a few idle moments wondering how Graham would react to such a last-minute failure, being so close and yet so far.

That everything in him now rejects that thought is the fault of the bond, obviously...but he can't deny that he's gained a certain appreciation for Will Graham that goes beyond simple curiosity. It's a rare human who can sit down to dine with him with no qualms for the fare, and like Alana, Will seems determined to engage with him as a person, not a monster.

Unlike Alana, he seems to have no trouble engaging with the monster as well.

The girl in his arms shifts as her tears taper off. She smells embarrassed but not afraid. If she knows anything of bonds and witnesses, she must know he would never hurt her, not for anything less than a dissolution of the bond itself, but that sort of certainty usually comes with experience. If she's been taught to think of their hungers only in terms of sacrifice, she may not realize what opportunistic feeders his kind really are.

If it's that, then he needs to find the family altar soon, preferably tonight. It's almost been a month, after all; after nearly a year of consistent windfalls, he doesn't doubt his less-civilized siblings will be lurking nearby, waiting impatiently for their next free meal.

Chapter End Notes

Little bit short, sorry, but I figured the first Nicholas Boyle confrontation would work better with all the stuff that comes next. Aaaaand I'm having my eyes worked on (I sort of want to start chanting "shots! shots! shots!" except, y'know, not in a good way), so bear with me, as there's going to be times I literally can't see my typos, red underlines and all. o.O

Chapter 15

She gathers herself slowly, too mortified to jerk away, though she can't believe she just cried all over *Hannibal Lecter*. She can't believe that he *let* her. Most embarrassing of all is how much she wants to stay right where she is. She never would have guessed from his perfect posture and strict reserve, but Hannibal is a champion hugger, wholehearted once he got over the surprise of it. She can feel how careful he's being with his strength, but there's no stiffness in his arms, no uneasy distance to remind her they're practically strangers. It's almost like hugging her dad, except she knows she's actually *safe*.

That nearly starts her crying again, but she swallows it down, scrubbing the heels of her palms under her eyes as she sits away from him at last. Gods, she hopes she didn't just ruin his suit. He doesn't even seem to care, eyes fixed solely on her, one large hand resting lightly on her shoulder until her breathing evens out at last.

She's about to excuse herself to the bathroom to splash water on her scalding cheeks when something draws Hannibal's attention at last, sharp eyes flicking up over her shoulder with predatory intensity as the rest of him stills.

"Abigail," Dr. Bloom says, more puzzled than concerned, as Abigail begins to turn. "There's someone here."

For one weird moment, she's as confused as Dr. Bloom, mind blanking as she tries to think of one single, solitary person who would visit her right now. Her dad's side of the family have been gone since before she was born, and what kin she has left on her mom's side never had much use for her. They never liked her dad in the first place; she doubts murdering her mom will have changed their minds.

Then she turns and sees Marissa's awkward smile, sympathetic and soft, and she's swamped by a relief so strong, it completely drowns the disappointment she only now realizes she'd been braced against. When she woke up in that hospital room alone, with no cards on the nightstand or messages from school friends to be passed along, she'd figured that was just how things were going to be. She hadn't let herself feel anything about it one way or the other. But seeing her oldest friend--the girl she sneaked across the backyard for impromptu sleepovers with, who taught her how to do her makeup when her mom was still saying she was too young--makes her throat go tight all over again.

"Hey, Abigail," Marissa says, so hopefully it's like she's worried Abigail won't want anything to do with *her*.

Scrambling up, Abigail shifts on the balls of her feet until Marissa opens her arms, and then she throws herself at her friend, hugging her tightly.

Laughing a little, Marissa squeezes her back, saying, "I missed you too."

She hears Hannibal rise behind her, his movements almost too quiet to catch, and feels Marissa's arms go tense around her. *It's okay*, she wants to reassure her, because Hannibal is

exactly like people say--polite, dignified, the kind of calm that could see you through hurricanes--but she's more preoccupied with how Marissa recognizes him when that's not the kind of celebrity news she follows. What have people been saying, and how much do they know?

Did they graffiti her house before or after word got out she'd witnessed a bond?

Stepping back with a wobbly smile, she wipes at her eyes again and turns to Hannibal. "Is it okay if Marissa and I go for a walk?"

Though she's seen him do it before, it's still a little strange when Hannibal turns first to Agent Graham before answering. It's not how she thought a relationship between an Other and a human would go at all--not that she's spent much time thinking about it, and she'd mocked that awful book series that came out a few years ago as hard as any girl with even an ounce of self-respect. They may not act like a lovey-dovey couple--and from what Hannibal said back at the hospital, they're not--but there's more respect in that silent question than she's seen from a lot of her friends' parents.

Graham casts a worried look through the den's sliding glass doors, but he's quick to smile. "Of course. Just stay within sight of the house, please," he adds, glancing back at Hannibal. For some reason, though he won't meet her eyes or even Dr. Bloom's, he seems to have no trouble with Hannibal's, though they never linger for long. "And if you see anything that seems out of the ordinary, come right back."

Right. Because whoever tagged her house might have more to say, and more bravery than it takes to pick up a can of paint.

"Do you mind if we continue to look around in the meantime?" Hannibal asks. He sounds so perfectly casual, she'd be inclined to distrust him on principle, except it's clear the police already made a thorough search of the place. She doubts there's anything left for anyone to find.

"Go right ahead," she says, and with a nervous smile for Dr. Bloom, she leads Marissa out into the yard.

Marissa doesn't really relax until they've got the doors between them and the others, halfway down the slope where the wide backyard meets the thin trickle of a stream at the edge of the woods beyond. It's funny, because the woods have always freaked Marissa out a little. Her family don't follow any of the gods, trading the hope of being overlooked over the chance that someone will answer when called on for protection. She's always stood a little closer to Abigail whenever they come near the trees.

"It really is okay, y'know," Abigail promises as they slow to a halt. "Dr. Lecter's not going to go on a murderous rampage or something."

Marissa snorts. "You and I both know the minute I open my mouth, I'll be next on the menu."

It's not really funny, but it surprises a nervous giggle out of Abigail anyway. She tries muffling it behind her hand, but Marissa grins, unfazed. "I don't know...Agent Graham

doesn't seem like the most tactful guy either, and they're bonded."

Casting a wary glance over her shoulder, Marissa leans in with a wicked smirk. "Blowjobs."

"Oh my gods," Abigail squeaks, dropping her flaming face into her hands. "I don't--they're not *like* that. The whole thing was an accident, only I don't think they can break it off, and...."

Marissa eyes her shrewdly. They've known each other long enough that she only waits until she's sure Abigail's run out of steam before pressing onward. "There was a story about it online a few days ago. It was calling them 'murder husbands,' but no one can make up their minds if that's because it's how they met or how they got married."

"It wasn't," Abigail croaks, the embarrassed flush draining rapidly from her cheeks. "When my dad...." She cups her hand around the scar. Even though it's covered by her scarf, it still feels like the whole world can *see*. "Agent Graham tried to save me. He had to make Hannibal step in when he couldn't, only it turns out that's how you accidental-marry an Other."

Marissa's brows fly up; mostly she looks impressed. "I didn't think you could *make* someone like that do anything."

"Maybe if you surprise him into it," Abigail says with a small smile, thinking of how she'd caught Hannibal off-guard herself not half an hour ago. "I think I remember a lot of yelling, too."

"Wow. Where's he hiding the wheelbarrow? Because he must need one to carry around those enormous balls."

She's blindsided by helpless giggles again, and gods, it feels *good* to laugh without the shadow of fear hanging over her. The thing is, Marissa's right. It's easy to feel a little invincible knowing one of the Mother's children has her back, but for how soft-spoken he is, Agent Graham didn't hesitate to go toe-to-toe with an Other, rushed in to save her when her dad could've been hiding behind an entire arsenal of guns. The Robinsons just down the road are doomsday preppers. Graham wouldn't have stood a chance.

"He's really nice, though," she admits to the soft earth at her feet, damp with the autumn rains and a fresh carpeting of leaves. "They both are. And I guess the whole bond witness thing makes them feel like they need to look out for me, but...."

"It feels like you're betraying your dad if you let them?"

She nods without looking up, both hands clenching tight around her elbows.

From the corner of her eye, she sees Marissa chewing her lower lip, deciding how she's going to say what she's definitely going to say anyway. She never pulls her punches, probably flipped her mom off on the way out the door to come over here in the first place. She's always been the wild one, like Abigail's always been the good girl, only look where that got her. Maybe if she'd been a little wilder herself, a little less the perfect daughter, things would've turned out different.

"Hey. If anybody betrayed anyone, it was your dad. At this point, you don't owe him anything, okay? And listen. If they really do want to help you, like this isn't some weird setup where some creepy old guy is going to end up watching you sleep--"

"*No!* Oh my *gods*--"

"I say you let them," Marissa finishes in a tone more serious than Abigail's heard from her since Marissa came over to say her dad would be staying with his *other* family from now on, and good fucking riddance. "People have been talking, okay? Everyone on the block was on the news. And at school. Such whores."

"Did you talk to the news?" She's not worried, exactly. They probably would've had to censor half of what she said if Marissa got her hands on some dumb reporter who thought the pretty face meant there was nothing underneath.

"No," Marissa scoffs, like the answer should be obvious, but-- "No!" she says more insistently when Abigail can't clear her face of doubt fast enough. "My mom doesn't want me talking to you, much less the news."

That's exactly what she'd been afraid of, actually. She hopes she'll still be able to write to Marissa when she gets back to the hospital, that her letters will make it through, since she knows she won't be getting her phone back anytime soon. Maybe Hannibal won't mind if she gives Marissa his address, just in case.

She forces a smile. "Since when do you listen to her?"

"Well, clearly I don't. I'm talking to you right now." She sounds so pleased with herself, the way she always is when she gets her way, and somehow her way has always been Abigail. She's never let anyone separate them, not her mother with her distrust of the faithful, not her father with his bid for summer visits, not even the other kids who teased her for spending so much time with that boring Hobbs girl.

Marissa's smugness slips away before Abigail even knows what to say. "Everybody thinks you did it, you know?" Her voice is soft, like she doesn't even want to admit it aloud, eyes dark when she turns to search Abigail's face. There's no accusation there, only concern.

"Do you think I did it?" The words escape before she can rein them in, and she honestly doesn't know what answer she's hoping for. She wants so badly for Marissa to just trust her, even though she knows she doesn't deserve it.

"I don't think you're the type," Marissa says firmly, bedrock in her conviction. And then, because she's Marissa, she just has to add, "Then again, I didn't think your father was the murder-suicide type. Although I guess the hunting could've been a clue."

"Mine or his?"

"Both, now that you mention it," Marissa says with a teasing half-smile. When Abigail just stares at her, Marissa rolls her eyes heavenward, smile softening. "I don't think you did it."

"I do," someone says out of nowhere, startling them both when a boy only a little older than them steps out from behind a tree. Gods, has he been watching them? Who even is he? She'd have noticed someone with hair that red, but she's never seen him before in her life.

With a nervous glance at Marissa for luck, she gathers her courage. "This is private property," she warns as he comes closer, uncrossing her arms in case he makes a lunge for her.

He doesn't step over the narrow ribbon of the stream, hanging back amongst the narrow saplings on the other side of the property line. That doesn't keep his words from hammering against her ears. "You were the bait, right? That's how it worked? You lure them back to Daddy for dinner?"

"Hey! Piss off," Marissa snaps, bending down to snatch a stone up from the carpet of leaves and chucking it at his head. He ducks, which means it was just a warning shot; Marissa's got a softball player's arm and isn't afraid to use it.

"Did you chat them up? Did you help your old man cut out their lungs like your new one did to my sister?"

Marissa's second rock hits him right above the eye. He ducks again with a curse, hand flying up and coming away bloody. He stares at his fingers in outraged disbelief, and when his head snaps up again, Abigail can see him weighing them: two girls, both slight, and the one is out of rocks.

Then she hears two new pairs of footsteps crunching through the leaves as they round the corner of the house, and has never wished more for her parents' gifts. Just not the one they would have appreciated.

Being able to *feel* help coming sounds like more of a gift to her than any trick of knowledge or stealth combined.

***

"Alana?" Hannibal invites, but even Will can tell he's just being polite.

Smiling up at him from her seat on the floor, Alana collects the pile of photographs Abigail had abandoned, begging off with a shrug. "I think I'll keep going through these for a bit. See what I can learn about Abigail's family before I have to ask her to talk about it."

Will wonders if Hannibal and Alana have talked about this already, but Alana's sharp. If the two of them going over the Hobbs' place with the combined focus of both their talents seems at all like playing favorites, she keeps her concerns to herself.

There's probably a lot more to be learned from the contents of the den, but Hannibal seems to be on the hunt for something specific, and Will falls automatically in step. They look in only briefly at Abigail's room, Hannibal's nostrils flaring once, but whatever he's expecting to find apparently has nothing to do with her. Will finds that more comforting than he's willing to admit, even to himself.

Climbing the stairs again, they bypass the kitchen in favor of the master bedroom, and this at last has Hannibal pausing. It's a shadowy room despite the large windows overlooking the forest, only catching the light in the late afternoon. The sunsets would probably be spectacular if it weren't for the trees.

Hannibal prowls the room thoughtfully, opening the closet and mostly ignoring the bed. Even for someone with Hannibal's nose, the scents in the house must have dulled over a month of disuse, but the closet's been shut up, free from drafts and contamination by crime scene cleaners and investigators.

"Tell me, Will. Would you say Abigail strikes you as a particularly social girl? Current visitor notwithstanding," he adds, crossing to the corner by the window where a wooden chair sits, a pair of comfortable slippers tucked neatly underneath. It looks like an antique, sturdy and serviceable but with an intricate pattern of antlers and wild roses carved into the back piece. Hannibal picks up the deerhide pillow resting on the seat and turns it over curiously in both hands.

It doesn't require his gift to have Will shaking his head. "No...she'd have been a loner. *Is*...something of a loner," he corrects himself with a wince. He's so used to piecing together his facts after the damage is done, he's almost forgotten how to use his words when he's talking about the living. "If she'd been part of the popular crowd, not in his pocket so much, it wouldn't have hit so hard when he realized she was leaving."

"So no throngs of friends coming in or out. Just the family and maybe a few close friends."

"Probably just the one," Will admits uncomfortably. It's a lonely picture he's painting, and it almost feels like he's outing a fellow introvert by saying it aloud. "Why?"

"I was wondering about the other scents I noticed around the house." The pillow's seams are held together by sturdy leather lacings; rather than break them the way he likely could without much effort, Hannibal's nimble fingers pick apart the knot to loosen the ties. "The oils collected by human hair are rather distinctive. I thought at least one scent might've been her mother's, but it appears I was wrong."

Will already knows what he'll find when Hannibal hands him the pillow, but he rolls it in his hands anyway until the morbid stuffing pushes out through the gap: a tangled mass of dark brown hair.

"Gods," he mutters, clenching his jaw. "How the hell did they miss this? They knew he was a cannibal--at the very *least* they should've had dogs in to search for remains."

"They may only have searched the more obvious places: the basement and the woods, maybe the kitchen. Or perhaps they neglected to give the dogs the right scents to follow."

"Or maybe there was a lot more neglect than that," Will mutters, quietly fuming. He knows for certain this wasn't Jack's people's work, and maybe that's all it was. Or maybe the case looked too cut-and-dried to bother: a killer caught in the act, and a daughter tarred with guilt by association. All evidence neatly vanished so no one had to think about how narrow the distance is between Us and Them.

"It's something to give Jack, at least," Hannibal says, nodding at the pillow clenched in Will's fists. "It also makes it all the more imperative I find the family's altar. Tonight if possible. Perhaps while Jack's occupied with this new evidence...?"

He's so careful not to outright suggest they distract Jack while they sweep up the mess, and it's anyone's guess whether that's for his own plausible deniability or the sake of Will's theoretical conscience. "You think we're going to find something."

Hannibal eyes Will consideringly but doesn't hold back. "I think whoever consecrated Abigail to my Mother, it wasn't Garret Jacob Hobbs, or it was done when she was very young. Long before he had time to grow attached and repent his devotion."

"Because he was sacrificing those girls in her place. First fruits," Will adds bitterly. He knows the traditions, though he's never been part of them. His dad said his prayers to the sea and the swamp, but he was never much of a sailor, preferring to stay safe on dry land and fix what others wrested back to shore.

"Or those who can be most easily spared," Hannibal says delicately, reminding him of Abigail's unenviable position: the ungifted daughter of two god-touched worshippers. "The irony is that Abigail would have been safer on any college campus in the world than her own backyard; my kind rarely establish themselves in cities, and no other brood would have touched her with my Mother's mark on her. But marked and made...convenient by location...I'm not surprised the Hobbs felt the approach of my siblings and took it as a sign."

"And you...plan for us to bury the evidence?" He knows he shouldn't be listening to this, shouldn't even be entertaining the notion, but he also knows that Abigail doesn't deserve to be the target of everyone else's thwarted need for revenge.

"Not at all," Hannibal says, his smile as hard and sharp as the gleam in his eyes. "I plan to bury my kin, should any be waiting for their monthly feed. As we've seen, loose talk can be dangerous. I don't want any of them muddying the waters out of spite, or in exchange for lenience. The only ones who won't have heard their run of windfalls are over won't be living by the terms of the Compact anyway, but we all know the penalty for risking the continuation of the arrangement. It's been too useful for all sides to shake the foundation by which we coexist."

Will nods. He gets it, but.... "If we're doing this tonight, I don't think I brought enough bullets."

The fractional widening of Hannibal's eyes is the only sign he's surprised the man. "While I appreciate the offer, I'd be going alone. As dangerous as we are even to each other--especially to each other--my kind often travel in packs. Despite your training, I couldn't guarantee your safety."

"Not asking you to," Will says with a frown. Does Hannibal really think he's just going to let him drive off to face an unknown number of half-feral Others alone? "Look," he says, glancing out the window, "we've got a good few hours before--"

Movement in the trees. A shock of bright red hair and a dark coat, leather or denim. Hard to tell at this distance, but not a hunter, not a cop, no one who belongs out there.

"Hannibal," he says tightly, and then they're moving as one, out of the room and down the hall, through the front door and around the side of the house. The sound of raised voices speeds his heart, and he almost breaks into a jog when he sees the other girl peg a rock at the strange boy's head. For a moment it looks like the kid's weighing his chances, but when he sees them coming, he spits at the ground and backs away, turning after a few steps to bolt deeper into the trees.

Abigail wastes no time in coming to meet them, but her friend hangs back a little glaring after the boy as if daring him to come back. She's a fierce one, he'll say that for her; it eases his mind somewhat to know Abigail has other people who want to keep her safe.

"He said he was somebody's brother," Abigail reports once she's close enough to not have to shout.

Will exchanges a look with Hannibal, whose mouth firms thoughtfully. They're frankly spoiled for choices of sisters, but instinct tells him this was about the most recent one, who wasn't one of Hobbs' kills at all.

Before they can ask for more details, another pair of hurried footsteps has him tuning to confront some new threat, but the woman at his back is middle-aged, empty-handed, isn't looking at any of them at all.

"Marissa! Come home," she orders sharply. He can't quite place her accent, much fainter than Hannibal's; it isn't shared by her daughter at all.

Marissa ducks her head a little but doesn't shy away. "No."

"Come *home*," her mother repeats, folding her arms expectantly.

Anger flaring, Marissa snaps back, "Can you stop being such a bitch?"

On his right, Hannibal shifts on his feet, brows arching. Considering Hannibal actually liked his parents, misses them still, Will gets the feeling he's not impressed with the attitude. Knocking their elbows together gently, he shoots Hannibal a chiding look that curls a faint smile in the corners of Hannibal's mouth. When his head dips a little a moment later, Will's cautiously optimistic that any possible crisis has been averted.

With a huffed sigh, Marissa gives in grudgingly, muttering, "See you later," to Abigail like a promise and a challenge.

"Bye," Abigail offers in a small voice, watching her go as Marissa's mother grabs her by the arm to quick-march her away.

Patting Abigail's shoulder comfortingly as he passes, Will heads for the trees, taking a long step over a tiny, bubbling stream with his eyes peeled for any hint of movement. Hannibal follows him without a word, chin up as he breathes in deep, sidetracked almost immediately

by something in the leaves. Bending over, he plucks a rock from the nest of wet leaves, handling only the edges. Will's unsurprised to find blood and bits of skin clinging to it; that other girl had a decent pitching arm from what he could see.

"I'd hang on to that, just in case we need to place him here beyond the shadow of a doubt. He may have done what he came here for, but I don't like that he was here at all."

"Indeed. We should report this, yes?"

"Yes. And get Jack to send out a team that won't half-ass the job to look over the house again."

"Then I'll trust you to keep watch over Abigail tonight."

"Hannibal," he begins with a scowl, ready to take up the argument all over again.

"Please. One of us should remain behind, just in case."

He can't necessarily argue with that, but he doesn't have to like it. He'd like to say their odds are better together, but...Hannibal's been fighting his kin for a long time. Having Will there might prove to be a fatal distraction.

"Fine. But wake me up the minute you get back."

"It could be fairly late...."

"Good thing I'm a light sleeper, then."

And there goes that look of surprise again. He almost feels bad that he just keeps doing it, but maybe it's not so bad a thing that he can keep Hannibal on his toes.

Gathering himself with a solemn blink, Hannibal gives another of those regal little head-tilts, but he doesn't look displeased. "Then I'll do my best to conclude the matter swiftly."

"Did you still want to head to the Hobbs' cabin tomorrow?" He doesn't suggest Hannibal might need time to recuperate. He hasn't managed to outright insult the man yet, at least as far as he knows, and he'd like to keep it that way.

Casting another swift look through the trees, Hannibal nods, turning back towards the Hobbs' residence. "Considering the attention we've already drawn, the sooner we leave Minnesota, the better."

"Right. I'll let Jack know. The place is pretty isolated; he'll probably want to arrange some sort of police presence, just in case."

"Let's hope it proves unnecessary," Hannibal agrees as they make their way back to where Abigail stands, waiting anxiously for their return.

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Dr. Bloom comes out to meet them when they're on their way back to the house, having apparently wandered away from the den before all the commotion. Abigail's not going to ask where she went; if people have been snooping her room, she *really* doesn't want to know.

"Has your friend already gone home?" she asks, sympathetic as she examines Abigail's face, drawing all the wrong conclusions.

"Yes," Hannibal answers before she can leap to Marissa's defense. "There was an altercation with a boy in the woods. Verbal," he adds as Dr. Bloom's eyes go wide, "for the most part, although Abigail's friend did a fine job of chasing him away without our assistance. It might be wise to head back to the hotel, however. We can return when tensions aren't running quite so high."

She can already tell that that's never going to happen, but she doesn't contradict him. Truth is, she doesn't really want to be here anymore either. Whatever she thought she was going to find here (*the past, a second chance, a way to rewind time itself*), there's nothing left but empty rooms and photographs. She doesn't really want to go back to the hospital, but she's already tired of haunting the place where she survived.

"Yes, of course," Dr. Bloom says with a reassuring smile. "Abigail? Was there anything you wanted to take with you?"

There's a *lot*, but most of it is forever out of her reach. "Just the pictures. Maybe some of my clothes."

Dr. Bloom nods. "I think I saw some empty boxes left over from the investigators. No stickers. I'll get them for you."

Her eyes flick between the other two before she turns and heads back first, apparently deciding the three of them need a moment. Whatever Abigail's expecting--more reassurances, for one of them to ask how she feels, like she even knows herself--it's not what she gets.

"Abigail," Hannibal says quietly. "Your family's altar. Was it nearby?"

Her face goes cold, cheeks prickling as the blood drains away. Why would he even ask that? Not that she thinks she's in any danger of being introduced to it herself, but she has her own suspicions about what her dad was doing. If she's right, won't they think she knew?

"It's all right," Graham jumps in while she's still standing there frozen. "We don't think you had anything to do with any of this. The thing is...now that you're awake, there'll be other people wondering the same thing. We just want to make sure what gets recorded actually matches with the facts."

"Which will be aided greatly by getting there first," Hannibal adds, leaning in toward her a little with a sly, sidelong smile for Graham, as if he's teasing. Only he's not. He's really, really not. And Graham is *letting* him. With a pointed eyeroll and a sigh of despair, but still.

"You'll get used to his sense of humor eventually," Graham assures her with a hesitant smile. "I promise, neither of us think you're guilty. We just want to help."

She can tell Graham at least believes it, but she can't help glancing at Hannibal next, finding him gazing patiently back. There's nothing in his eyes to give him away, his amiable mask perfect, but...maybe she's being unfair. Maybe it's his Otherness that makes her think that he might not care one way or the other. That her involvement in their bond makes her his, and that's as far as his opinion stretches on the matter.

When she swallows, hard, she feels the scar her dad left her pull against the skin of her throat. Maybe...maybe this time she can do better.

"It's, um. It's not in walking distance, but it's not far. I can draw you a map."

"I'd appreciate that," Hannibal says, soft and pleased. She can practically feel the approval radiating off him like sunlight on her skin, and it's...not really that different, is it? Her dad had been proud of her too. She's still acting to save her own skin. Only this time there's no unspoken threat behind it, just a choice that's hers and hers alone.

Do you want to tell? Or do you want to put the past behind you and *live?*

It's a question that doesn't need to be asked, one she's answered eight times already.

She wants to live. She will always, always want to live.

Ducking her head, she tucks her hair behind her ears with a tremulous smile and lets herself be warmed by their approval.

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The woods that began at the back of the Hobbs' home thin in places the further one drives, but mostly they swell, stretch, eating up the empty miles between Bloomington and the next town. Barbed wire runs along the road in places, but the land never opens up to pasturage, and no mailboxes mark the dirt turnoffs that sprout along the highway here and there. It's an excellent place to settle if one worships the right sort of god; necessary, even, if sacrifice is best made far from where one sleeps.

Though the Hobbs' place had the lived-in feel of a long-term residence, there's been very little shift in the town borders: the 'suburb creep' that plagues areas populated by less territorial broods, or those less inclined to hunt. The forests he'd grown up with were tangled and old, home to more than just the Thousand. This homey patch of wilderness might not support a population quite so diverse, but when he parks the rental and steps out into the trees, a persistent ache of nostalgia blossoms behind his ribs.

Breathing in the cooling air of an early sunset, he stands by the open driver's-side door and listens to the woods come alive around him. The birds startled by his arrival have already begun to pick up their songs once more, the sawing of a few hardy crickets droning from the underbrush. Anything larger would have run from the sound of his tires, but so far the evening seems peaceful.

Assured he's alone, at least for the moment, he takes off his shoes and socks, feet remembering the feel of earth beneath them with almost sybaritic pleasure. He enjoys his

suits, the spectacle he creates and the unassailable armor of civilization they wrap him in, but that charade is only half of his birthright. Out here, under the trees, he's free to let his other half loose.

Leaving his shoes on the floorboard and the rest of his clothes on the driver's seat, he shuts the door without locking it and drops his human guise with a sigh of relief. Though the heavy crown of his antlers pulls the muscles of his neck and shoulders taut, others unspool their tension for the first time in months. Aside from that brief transformation at the hospital, he's been too busy to hunt properly, satisfying himself with older kills saved half on instinct against the threat of leaner times. It's good to be himself again, the promise of a hard chase, struggling meat, blood hot and rich on his tongue quickening his pulse.

First things first. While his night vision is excellent, it'd be best to inspect the Hobbs' altar while there's still some daylight left.

The songbirds who'd regained their voices earlier startle away as he slips off the rutted dirt road to vanish into the trees. The crows are more welcoming; they know his kind, that their presence often means an easy meal later. When one spots him, it sends up a call to its kin, wings and tailfeathers flexing with each strident cry.

From somewhere much deeper in the forest, he hears echoes calling back.

The altar is just as Abigail described: a waist-high tumble of heavy stones that brace a stag's skull, stripped clean by time and the elements, upright with its antlers stretching skyward. The tines have been filed sharp, stained by long use, but there's no scent of decay. Only blood, faded nearly to nothing. The offerings weren't left to sit, then; something came along promptly to retrieve them, and the stones that hold the stag skull in place look like they haven't been moved in decades. An animal might have pulled the whole thing awry in tugging free its find, but not his kin. No sense in spoiling the meat.

Though he paces a careful circle around the pile of stones, he finds nothing else: no scraps of cast-off clothing, no bones or teeth to mark this place as out of the ordinary from any other place of worship. At least Hobbs was wise enough not to leave an obvious trail back to his own doorstep; he must have returned to gather up the inedible remains to dispose of properly instead of leaving it to chance.

Good. That should work in their favor.

The thrashing of wings alerts him moments before a crow alights in a nearby tree, some of its feathers tinged grey with age. It eyes him sidelong as it inches along its branch to a more comfortable perch, its gaze measuring.

He perhaps wasn't entirely truthful when he led Will to believe animal speech was beyond him. His ability to convey his own thoughts might be limited, but he can understand them just fine.

Here! the old crow calls with a hoarse shout, one eye fixed on him the entire time. *Over here!*

A feast? comes the chorus of its kin, closer by the minute.

The old crow fluffs its feathers, a judicious gleam in its round, dark eyes. *A fight.*

A feast! the others carol back as they soar into the clearing, half a dozen at first, with more on the way.

Hannibal smiles, slow and lazy, as he sees the first dark shape, larger and much lower to the ground, move through the trees. The crows aren't wrong. With what they've likely been eating for generations on end, he's not even surprised.

The first sibling to slip from the trees is male, likely the strongest, but still almost half a head shorter than Hannibal and not quite so broad in the chest. Next is a female, then another male...and a second female. An unusual numbering. It buzzes at his instincts, has him looking for a fifth to make up a decisive majority, and leaves his nerves jangling with dissatisfaction when none emerges. A trap? Or maybe it explains why the smaller two are hanging back as if waiting for the numbers to tip in either direction. He could challenge, take control of this odd-sized pack and bend them to his will. Or he and the two stronger ones could decide in the wordless way of such things that three is better than five when two are easy prey.

Their standoff stretches in tense silence for a long moment before it's finally broken, but not in any way an outsider could discern.

You're early, the strongest one says at last, tone almost neutral as he tries to maintain a balance between arrogance and caution. *The human always comes on the night of no moon.*

It's not quite an ache, when the hollow place above and behind his eyes hums to life with speech. It's more the soreness of an unworked muscle tipped suddenly out of stasis. Speaking like this had been natural as breathing, once. With no one left that he cares to converse with, it's a skill he only flexes on nights like these.

I assumed. Does it just leave the meat here, then? I thought they always asked for things.

A dark chuckle circles through the pack as they begin to relax, at the same time edging closer. *Who knows why the humans do anything? Too scared to stay and bargain, maybe. But yes. It only gives.*

Paying to keep us fat and lazy, the stronger of the two females suggests, her eyes making a slow circuit of Hannibal's bared form. They linger on his shoulders, the corded strength of his arms; it's not pride alone that makes him think he comes out the better in comparison to the pack's leader. The four are all very typical of their brood: shaggy with black and dark brown fur, their faces half-bestial, antlers a snarling mass of sharpened bone. Next to them, his smooth skin and symmetry stands out like a candle in a darkened room. *You're a strange one, brother. What sort of mate did our Mother take to get one like you?*

No one you'd ever want to meet, Hannibal assures her, amused. This is the second gift his Father has given him: the ability to pass in the human world, and to slip right under the noses of his kin, their knowing sense blinded by his Father's blood.

He strikes before they can decide what to make of him, going for the strongest first in direct defiance of everything his kin would consider sensible. It catches the weaker two off guard,

sends them reeling back in confusion at the certainty the attack should be meant for them when none is forthcoming. Subterfuge would no doubt be wiser, but he wants there to be no mistake: he means to kill them all.

He wants to savor the taste of their fear, the way he'd once had no choice but to choke on the taste of another's.

In the branches above, the old crow gives a rolling, clicking call of sage satisfaction.

A feast! its kin echo, their numbers growing by the minute. *A feast!*

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Will starts awake at once at the soft knock on his hotel room door, one he'd been subconsciously listening for even in the private haze of sleep. Before his mind even wakes up to what it means, he's sitting up and throwing off the blanket, his bare feet hitting the carpet a moment later. His skull gives one lazy throb of pain, centered just above his right eye, but it subsides as he rises, rubbing his face as he makes his way to the door.

Hannibal stands on the other side, as dressed down as Will's ever seen him outside the kitchen unless he counts that time in the hospital. His jacket and tie are gone, and though his blue shirt's buttoned up and neatly tucked in, there's a dark patch on his left shoulder that has Will cursing under his breath.

"*Fuck.* Are you okay? What--gods, get in here. Can I--do you need a doctor?"

He doubts any part of his disjointed babble was even the slightest bit polite, but something about his word vomit tugs one corner of Hannibal's mouth up in a tiny smile regardless. "I've just come from the hospital, actually, but not for treatment. I hoped I might trouble you for assistance instead."

"Me? I mean--I know basic first aid, but...."

"That's all that should be required," Hannibal says, stepping inside as Will belatedly moves back to give him room. As he shuts the door behind the man, he notices the plastic bag Hannibal is carrying. It's from the drugstore just around the corner, not the hospital pharmacy, which are both undoubtedly closed. He must've planned for the possibility before he ever left, would likely have taken care of it himself except....

"Show me," Will orders, a sick twist of dread knotting tight in his stomach.

Hannibal makes short work of his shirt, shrugging out of it without a wince and draping it neatly over the back of one of the room's two dining chairs, even though it's undoubtedly ruined. Some analytical part of Will's mind notes the bloodstains come without corresponding tears in the fabric; he must've changed back into the shirt after the fight. He'd been transformed, then, which Will had been expecting, but he can't help noticing Hannibal's pants are in much better shape than last time.

The bite on Hannibal's shoulder has already been seen to, a gauze pad taped down neatly with only a few stray dots of blood seeping through. Scratches stripe his chest, the worst of them dug in parallel lines just under his pectorals, deepest toward the center and turning shallow as they drag back over his ribs. The skin around them is a feverish pink, but they look freshly cleaned, already beginning to scab over.

When Hannibal turns to present his back, Will curses again, this time with more feeling. One look at that bite--the teeth wounds spaced too wide; a gouge, not a clamp--and he can see it as if it's being played out in front of him. Arms wrapped around a broad back, talons clawing for purchase as someone tries to pull him off something or just hold him back, gripping on with everything they have, even their teeth. It isn't enough. Some part of him is viciously glad of that.

"I assure you it looks worse than it is," Hannibal says, unflappable as always. "I've always been a fast healer. It's just an awkward place to reach, and I wouldn't care to ruin another shirt."

"You sure you want me to handle this?" Will asks, ignoring Hannibal's attempt at humor. "Some of these punctures might need stitches."

"I'm afraid I have a certain wariness of leaving myself in the hands of professionals," Hannibal admits, a thread of something darker underscoring his wry tone. "One never knows when the urge to find out what makes me tick will win out over common decency."

Will blows out a sigh that ruffles his sleep-mussed hair, a throb of sympathy knocking at his ribs. "Sometimes talking to you is like looking at myself," he mutters, which...maybe only makes sense to him, but he was asleep five minutes ago. No one ought to expect sense out of him at--damn. Two in the morning. "Wait, what were you doing at the hospital? And, uh--supplies, please. Have a seat?" he adds, waving at the foot of the bed.

"Most hospitals are happy to allow us the use of their incinerators, at least when the remains to be disposed of belong to a fellow Other," Hannibal explains, sitting bolt upright despite his wounds and the late hour. He's made of far sterner stuff than Will, who slouches the instant he settles in at Hannibal's back, one leg curled under him and the other foot on the floor. Even seated, he's just that littlest bit taller, and even though his human form looks to be five, maybe ten years older, he's fit in a way that Will can't help envying, just a little. Where does he find the time--no, scratch that. Where does he find the *energy* to work out? He works longer hours than Will does, but Will wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of a fight with him in either form.

"Huh," Will says absently as he tears open a pad of sterile gauze, dampening it with alcohol and then hesitating at the final moment. "Here goes," he warns, giving Hannibal time to brace himself.

He doesn't even flinch when the gauze touches his back. Will starts at the outside, wiping away smeared trails of blood and patches that must've crusted to his shirt before being pulled loose, teeth bared in a grimace the entire time. Some half-thought impulse to not startle the man with each touch prompts him to splay his other hand across Hannibal's shoulder blade, the hard curve fitting neatly into his palm. He's noticed before that Hannibal tends to run hot,

but the bare skin under his hand is still warmer than he expects. More...not *human*, because he has no illusions about that. Just...more real, perhaps. As if Hannibal, with his relentless, impossible perfections had been an impossible creature in his mind until this proof that he could be injured like anybody else.

"So you had the body...bodies?"

"Yes."

"Incinerated. I guess I assumed you'd eat them," Will says with a tiny frown, dabbing gently at the first puncture.

Hannibal shrugs one shoulder--the injured one, the idiot, as if trying not to make Will feel self-conscious about the hand resting on his back. "If we'd been closer to home, certainly. I understand there used to be shipping companies one could employ for such things, but the Chesapeake Ripper's activities have led to so many regulations, most of them have since closed."

"That's really going to piss some people off if it turns out he's an Other," Will says as he reaches for a fresh pad of gauze.

"You think he's not?"

Will has to smile as Hannibal perks up. Not that he'd shown much in the way of exhaustion before, but he's like a cat: never more alert than when he's got a puzzle to bat around.

"Some days I don't know what to think. I mean, he's smart. Not just smart--brilliant, actually. And most people don't see it, because his scenes are so clean. They're the polar opposite of yours. People see your displays, and even knowing what they are, they see...art. People look at the Chesapeake Ripper's and they see absolutely nothing. Which is exactly what he wants."

"I see. And he's even evaded you?" He shifts a little to look back over his shoulder; it presses his back a little more into Will's hand, but Will just firms his touch, holds him steady.

"Like I said, he's smart. He doesn't have a pathology to match anything we've seen before--he may not even have a pathology at all. He has *reasons*," Will elaborates before Hannibal has to ask, "and they're either deceptively simple or simply deceptive. Sometimes I think the clinical aspect itself is a message," he admits, frowning at the broad expanse of skin and muscle before him, trustingly bared. Under his palm, Hannibal's slow inhales and exhales remain comforting as a metronome. "Like he's saying they don't deserve any more than that. Definitely not the perfect crime, which he could clearly pull off. He wants them found that way: utterly unremarkable, of no consequence to anyone."

"Fascinating," Hannibal murmurs, voice warm. "You paint a compelling picture; I confess I hadn't found him particularly interesting before."

"You will," Will says with a quiet laugh. "If you plan on continuing with the FBI, Jack will drag you into the hunt for him eventually. Between you and me, it's gone beyond being a point of pride; it's a full-blown obsession."

"I'll be sure to bear that in mind."

He can hear the smile in Hannibal's voice, his amusement at having his own words turned back on him when he least expected it. It has Will grinning a little as well, inexplicably pleased with himself. It doesn't even sting to realize they *have* managed to socialize like adults, that Hannibal's been right in every prediction. The man's a fascinating bundle of contradictions, all but alien in one minute and in the next as familiar as home. He almost sees himself in Hannibal, and maybe that should worry him, but he's never felt so comfortable with another person in his life.

"Yeah, well. Maybe also keep in mind you're not invincible the next time you turn down backup. How many were there, anyway?"

"Ah. Only four."

Will's hand stills, the fingers of the other tightening as that sinks in.

"Four?"

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There are already half a dozen squad cars waiting at the Hobbs' hunting cabin when they pull in. It seems an excessive number, but after what happened the day before, perhaps Jack is wary of taking chances. It still leaves Hannibal on edge, even though he's actually done very little recently that anyone could object to. Part of him wishes he were behind the wheel as they approach, but Will had stubbornly insisted Hannibal rest and leave the driving to him, and he hadn't felt it politic to argue. In all honesty, it's been so long since anyone fussed over him, he's lost the knack of turning their concerns aside.

Will's frowning as well as their vehicle rolls to a halt, and it only deepens when they see Jack come out to meet them.

"Is that Jack?" Alana asks from the backseat, as confused as the rest of them. In the rearview mirror, he sees her lay a hand on Abigail's arm, keeping her firmly in her seat. As always, her instincts are impeccable. "I thought he'd be busy with the other investigation today."

It had taken a bit of finesse, but they'd managed to pull Alana aside long enough to explain what they'd found at the house, agreeing unanimously that Abigail could be left out of the loop for now. If Jack has decided to trample over their wishes in this....

"So did we," Will says grimly, unclipping his seatbelt with a glance at Hannibal. "Maybe you two should wait here. If they've reopened the investigation on this place, we're only going to get in the way."

Alana nods, sitting back and briefly squeezing the hand Abigail has clenched on the seat between them. Hannibal wishes he had time to reassure her, but instead he joins Will in stepping out of the vehicle, going around the front to stand shoulder to shoulder, not so coincidentally blocking Jack's path to the others.

"Will. Dr. Lecter," Jack greets them with more than his usual reserve. "It seems like you had a busy day yesterday."

"Busier than whoever worked that scene," Will grumbles, throwing the ball back in Jack's court with the reminder that they'd been more than forthcoming. "Let me guess...all the dogs were busy and there were no Others on that team because...bad hiring practices?"

Jack fails to look amused. "We're looking into that. In the meantime, would either of you recognize this person?"

Fishing his phone from his pocket, he holds it out to display a photo washed out by the too-bright glare of portable lights. The room is an odd shape, narrow and peaked, festooned with antlers, but of immediate interest is the young man hanging limply from their tines.

"That's the kid from yesterday," Will says without hesitation, glancing at Hannibal, who nods, narrow-eyed.

"Nicholas Boyle," Jack informs them, watching them closely. "Brother of Cassie Boyle. Your tithe," he adds, as if Hannibal could possibly be unaware. "Funny thing, though. This one wasn't registered. Anything you want to tell me, Doctor?"

"Wait," Will steps in with a scowl. "That was taken here. When did you find the body, and what was the time of death?"

"The officer who came to set up the police cordon found it when he made a check of the house. I suppose you're going to tell me you can account for Dr. Lecter's whereabouts around two AM." Jack doesn't even sound surprised, less heated than he should have been if he really thought Hannibal was the culprit. He's fishing, Hannibal realizes; he can only hope Will recognizes it as well.

"Actually, yes, considering he was with me."

Hannibal expects Will to launch into the full explanation, but instead he glares Jack down, letting him think what he will--and his thoughts are guaranteed to jump to less innocent things than field medicine.

Resting a hand briefly on Will's arm, Hannibal begins, "If I'm being accused--"

"Down, Jack," a new voice drawls from the cabin door: a neat-suited man edging into his fifties, clean-shaven, blond hair silvering at his temples. Though he looks at first glance to be the office-bound type, his hands are work-roughened and the corners of his eyes have pale creases, like a man who's spent long hours squinting against the sun. While Hannibal's attention is instantly caught by this new arrival, he doesn't miss the way Jack's lip curls in dislike, the way he clenches his jaw against the retort he wants to make. "Alan Palmeri, Director of the Minnesota Office of Registration. You made quite the splash with your last tithe here, Doctor. When I heard there was a flag filed against you, I thought I'd better come down and oversee the investigation myself."

Hannibal knows better than to see anything altruistic in Palmeri's actions. Humans like Will are vanishingly rare, in law enforcement most of all. Most likely he'd wanted the cachet of being the one to take Hannibal in if there'd been anything improper in the filing. Less likely but still possible: his high-profile status and model behavior prompted a harried call from Maryland threatening dire consequences if their poster child fell prey to some bureaucrat's overzealousness.

"Then as you're aware, I'm within my rights to meet the peer assigned to my case."

Palmeri snorts a laugh, mouth curving up in a frank half-grin. "And have you scare the life out of the poor bastard? No need. You're not a suspect, Dr. Lecter."

That should relieve him, but instead he finds himself more curious than before.

"And why is that?" Jack asks quickly, most of the unfriendliness gone from his tone. Interesting. He'd *wanted* Hannibal not to be guilty.

He wonders if this is what the child of feuding parents feels like and suddenly has much more sympathy for some of his patients.

"No scent. And by that I mean none at all. That's a trick of the Lord of Faces' brood; if it'd been one of the Thousand, our sniffer would've pegged him from a mile."

"A Shoggoth?" Hannibal asks, carefully not looking at Will. It's unusual for one of his Mother's brood to know who their father is; no one's ever asked, and until Will, he's never volunteered the information to anyone.

"All the noses you could ever need in one convenient package," Palmeri confirms with a wide, proprietary grin. "Or eyes. Or any other organ, for that matter. That said, it's too much of a coincidence for this not to tie back to you somehow, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm not sure how," Hannibal replies, truthfully enough. "Other than the obvious family connection, I'd never seen Nicholas Boyle before yesterday, and then only briefly."

"When he threatened your bond witness, correct?"

"Correct," Hannibal admits with a frown.

"But irrelevant," Will cuts in firmly. "If you're suggesting this was revenge, it doesn't make sense. Hannibal's due another tithe; he could have registered Nicholas Boyle as his intended, chosen a boon to fulfil, and been done with it."

"Yeah, I thought that seemed strange," Palmeri agrees easily. "Not just that it wasn't registered. Seemed a bit out of character for you to take two from the same family; you've never been one to double-dip. So far," he adds with a glance at Will.

"Childhood tormenters," Hannibal explains at Will's suspicious frown. "It's usually considered gauche to prey too heavily on a single family, but exceptions can be made."

Palmeri chuckles, shaking his head. "'Gauche,' he says. Sometimes I think you Others' mates are the real menace; give a human carte blanche to pick a target once a month, and you find out what people are really made of. But yeah, let's talk about this witness of yours."

That has Jack's attention in a hurry. "You think Abigail Hobbs is involved?"

"Only tangentially," Palmeri hedges, holding up a restraining hand. "I mean, you tell me what it looks like. We have Dr. Lecter here, *eminently* eligible bachelor, with a brand new bond witness who just so happens to have a lot of enemies. Now let's say you want to impress the man, really make a mark. Fortune and fame? Doesn't need 'em," Palmeri scoffs, waving the idea away. "But you could do him a favor, right? You could kill for him, only not right out in the open, because that just makes you look pathetic. No, you do it in secret, outside the Compact, because *that* shows you're serious."

"You think someone's courting me," Hannibal says, not nearly as surprised as he should be. To be fair, his admirers have gone to greater lengths to gain his attention in the past.

"Don't you? No offense, Graham, but I see a kill like this, and I hear, 'Look how much better I am than that human you saddled yourself with. I bet your bond witness feels safer already.'"

He's starting to understand why Jack's initial dislike was so obvious. Palmeri's jocular air is only a cover for how he's constantly circling, prying needle-like into every chink in the armor he finds. It's different from Jack's brute force bludgeoning, but the effect is the same.

Unfortunately, Palmeri has far too firm a grasp on Other psychology. Hannibal can see his point exactly, knows he's probably correct.

"So, tell me, Doctor. Have you met any Others that might fit the bill? Made any new contacts recently?"

"Only the four of my siblings I killed last night," he replies without missing a beat. If Palmeri doesn't know already, he's sure to learn of the incident when the hospital files its report. "I was able to track down the Hobbs family's altar, but it seems I wasn't the only one who had the same thought."

"You what?" Jack demands, a surge of temper sparking in his eyes.

Palmeri's easy grin fades into a frown. "Four? That's not a good number. Are you sure you didn't miss one?"

"I wondered that myself, but it seems they were alone."

"Huh. Well, even if you did, they wouldn't be our killer. I'd watch your back, though, or your humans' backs. You'd know better than I would how your kind carry grudges."

With that he seems to lose interest in them, lifting a hand in a desultory wave as he walks away. The same can't be said for Jack.

"*Tell* me you didn't contaminate a crime scene."

"No, I left the altar quite alone. But your people wouldn't have gotten very far if I'd sent them by themselves. My siblings were expecting humans, and they were ready for a meal. They wouldn't have cared if it came to them living or dead."

"So, what--he was sacrificing those girls after all?"

Will shakes his head, puzzling out the rest before Hannibal has to lead them through it. "No--they were waiting, Jack. But any Other living by the terms of the Compact would've heard the news a month ago that Hobbs had been caught. They wouldn't have stuck around."

"Indeed," Hannibal agrees, admiring once again the sharpness of Will's mind. "He wasn't there to beg a boon; he'd simply found a convenient method of disposal for what he couldn't use himself."

"You said yourself there had to be someone helping him eat," Will adds swiftly, moving in for the kill. "Turns out you were right."

Jack doesn't like that; it's obvious in the way he almost seems to be chewing his next words. When he takes a deep breath, some of the fight drains out of him as he lets it go. "You brought Abigail Hobbs back to Minnesota to find out if she was involved in her father's murders and another person dies."

That isn't at all why they brought her back, but if Will can hold his tongue in the face of such falsehoods, Hannibal can certainly manage the same.

"I think it's about time Abigail Hobbs left home permanently. And Doctor Lecter--I'm going to need you to show us this altar, and your kills."

Hannibal clenches his jaw, fighting instinctive outrage at the suggestion. "The latter will be difficult," he says, sharper than he'd like, "considering I've already taken them to be incinerated."

Jack drops his head, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "Active. *Murder.* Investigation," he grinds out, volume increasing with every word.

Hannibal narrows his eyes. "Jack. Do you happen to know, offhand, the going price for one ounce of my antlers?"

Beside him, Will's spine jerks straight, eyes wide. Jack merely goes still, dropping his hand after a moment. "Twenty thousand, give or take."

"Powdered," Hannibal points out ruthlessly. "Likely cut with any number of things, if it isn't elk or deer to begin with. Now what do you suppose four pairs, untouched, would fetch? Their hearts? Their teeth? Do you really trust the sanctity of a morgue locker against temptation like that?"

"I take your point," Jack admits, grudging but sincere.

"There's a reason we police ourselves," Hannibal can't resist adding, just to drive the lesson home. "We're not like you, Jack. Our blood and bones have consequences."

Jack nods, eyes sliding away.

It's difficult at times, but Hannibal knows when to bend. "I'll give you the map I have. Your people should be safe enough to go unescorted; it's well-hidden, but not far from the highway."

He could warn them about the crows, but he won't. If Jack wants that kind of consideration from him, he'll have to earn it.

Will is oddly hangdog on the way back to their vehicle, eyeing him sidelong with an unexpected, "Sorry. We should've burned the gauze from last night, shouldn't we? I mean, I know...*something* about ritual. Not a lot. Enough to get myself in trouble, probably, but I wasn't thinking--"

"Already taken care of," Hannibal says warmly, "but I appreciate your concern."

Will sighs. "You know, I've spent my entire life trying to ignore everything I could about Others, just because the rest of the world was so determined to lump me in with you. Sometimes it surprises even me how well that worked."

Honest regret laces his tone, but Hannibal would have found it difficult to hold it against him regardless. Where Jack's blindness springs from his narrow focus on his own goals, Will's is reactionary, a stubborn attempt to protect himself against the alienation of others. And even then, despite not wanting to look too closely or read too deeply into the shadow cast over his life for fear it will match his own, he's met Hannibal at every turn with curiosity and respect.

"Maybe so. But you're listening now."

The corner of Will's mouth tips up in a smile equal parts grateful and embarrassed; he almost meets Hannibal's eyes as he hunches a shoulder, saying, "Well, I'd be a pretty lousy husband if I didn't."

It's not the first time he's made some joke along those lines, but as they say, three times is a pattern. When Hannibal told Alana he and Will have much in common, it was to throw her off the scent, but now he wonders.

Maybe he isn't the only one surprised by how well they fit, who's discovering a sneaking desire to make this partnership work.

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Freddie can't get too close to the crime scene, even though she's been here before. *Especially* because she's been here before. She's already on shaky ground with Crawford, but it's the pair she sees exiting an unmarked SUV through the zoom lens of her camera that has her considering another vantage, further back in the trees.

She's made it her business to learn the faces of all the big players at the Registry, and she knows the Minnesota Director when she sees him. The agent with him--tall and balding, with bloated features and a paunch that spills over his belt in fleshy rolls--is probably his sniffer.

She'd be willing to bet there's a Shoggoth inside that sagging meat suit; they may not be photogenic, but only the Thousand have them beat as trackers.

Zooming in on the sniffer, she snaps off a few shots as she chews the inside of her lower lip. When she'd followed a tip that the new-minted Lecter family were all coming for a wilderness retreat, she hadn't expected a scoop this big at the end of it. She definitely likes that they've called in the Registry already, though she's not wild about the fact they brought in a Shoggoth as well. She hadn't been as careful as she could have been, climbing up to get that shot of the interior, but at least she'd stayed outside this time. Small mercies. Small-time players like Crawford and the FBI she can handle, but her one hard and fast rule is to steer clear of the Registry.

The worst Crawford can do is slap her with a lawsuit. In the name of preserving the Compact...she has no plans to find out what the Office of Registration can do, swiftly and cheerfully from what she's heard.

Still. There's not much they can do about her now; it's not a crime to report on what's about to become public knowledge: the great Hannibal Lecter, media darling and unofficial ambassador to all those holdouts who think the Compact was a mistake, investigated for the wrongful death of his last tithe's brother. It'll make great copy, and she's not even worried about the angle, because the Registry doesn't play favorites. Ever. Even Lecter's not immune. He'll have his investigation--and be exonerated, because even he isn't arrogant enough to think he can get away with murder when he has a tithe in reserve--and she'll just be doing her duty to the public when she passes that along. What people read into her words, well--that's nothing but viewer bias.

She nearly drops her camera when the Minnesota Director comes out of the cabin alone and...calls Jack to heel? Is that what she's seeing here? *Fuck.* She can't quite hear what they're saying at this distance, but she watches in disbelief as Palmeri strikes up what looks like a fairly amiable conversation with Lecter. Something he says sets Lecter's dog collector to barking, but Palmeri's body language is relaxed, even lazy.

He *knows* Lecter didn't do it. And that means his sniffer came back with either an unequivocal positive...or an unassailable negative.

Narrowing her eyes, Freddie grabs a couple more shots, even though it looks now like it may be a while before she gets a chance to use them. If this was just the work of one of Lecter's rabid human fans, she's going to teach them a thing or two about wasting a perfectly good vengeful brother. But if the scene was scentless, the killer untraceable....

If one of the Million 'Favored' Ones has wrecked this story for her, they'd better hope Daddy cares enough to save them, because she's going to be *very* put out.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Abigail watches with growing trepidation as Hannibal and Graham exit the SUV and immediately plant themselves between her and the man approaching. She's never seen him before, but he's in a nice suit, wears a gun on one hip and the confidence of a man used to being in charge. Though he's heavyset, maybe Hannibal's age, he moves like a steamroller with no care for anything in his path.

"Who's Jack?" she asks without taking her eyes from the scene before her.

"He's the head of the Behavioral Science Unit," Dr. Bloom explains. "With the FBI."

"Agent Graham's boss?" she guesses. They don't look happy to see each other if that's the case, but to be fair, Jack doesn't look like he's been happy to see anyone in his life.

"Not exactly. Will was teaching before they pulled him in to work your father's case. I think Jack would like to have him working for him permanently, but he's a gifted teacher, so the higher-ups would only sign off on letting Jack borrow him."

There's something pleased and proud in the little smile that hovers at the corner her mouth. Abigail's not sure what that's about: satisfaction at a friend's success, or the simple joy of seeing someone that humorless thwarted? She almost asks if that's what Freddie meant by 'not really an agent,' because that puts a whole new spin on things. It's one thing to be a little crazy in a job like Graham's, but being so good at what you do your bosses would rather you kept doing it than go out and catch killers?

"I thought he looked kind of like a professor," she says instead, preoccupied as someone new leaves the cabin. Another suit, another gun--only this one acts like he's the one running the show, even the FBI guys listening when he talks. There's something a little smarmy about his smile and the fact that he keeps on smiling when there's too many cops around to mean anything good. "Who's that?"

Dr. Bloom frowns. "I don't know. Someone local, maybe."

The conversation doesn't take long, but Abigail's stomach is sick with nerves by the end of it, though she couldn't say why. Nothing she did would have left any traces for anyone to find, and her dad wasn't the type to write stuff down. They're not going to find some kind of *secret murder diary* or anything, so what does she have to worry about? Nothing.

She tries telling that to her stomach, but it doesn't do much good.

Graham looks oddly guilty when they turn at last to go back, and there--he's doing it again, sort of peeking at Hannibal's face though he seems to lose his nerve this time before quite

meeting his eyes. Far from discomfited, Hannibal smiles warmly at something Graham says, clearly pleased.

"He doesn't like looking at people very much, does he?"

"Will has a gift that makes meeting people's eyes uncomfortable for him," Dr. Bloom says carefully. "Uncomfortable for them too, from what I hear. He'll tell you about it sometime. Just don't take it personally; he doesn't mean anything by it."

Abigial frowns. She hadn't realized Graham has a gift, and now she wonders what it is. If it were something *really* bad, like telepathy, he'd probably be in a psych ward somewhere, not out chasing the kind of people who'd screw his brain up even worse. Is he a seer? Clairvoyant? Or maybe it's something more focused and offensive, like showing--and knowing--people's deepest fears. What gods does he follow, and how did he earn a gift from them in the first place?

Dr. Bloom doesn't ask when the other two climb back inside the vehicle, which suggests they *all* know more than they're letting on. She should just keep quiet, not ask questions, but not knowing hadn't saved her before, had it?

"What's going on?"

Hannibal and Graham both half-turn in their seats, but Graham's eyes remain fixed on her shoulder while Hannibal's meet hers steadily. Come to think of it, he never shies away from Graham's either. Does Graham's gift not work on him, or does he just...not mind it? Maybe it's only uncomfortable to humans.

"There's been a slight change of plans," Hannibal replies. "It seems someone decided to use your family's cabin for much the same purpose your father did. I'm afraid it might be best if we cut our visit short and return to Baltimore; the investigators will have their hands full as it is."

Oh, gods. She's not even going to argue that she and her dad used this place for years and no one died but the occasional deer or squirrel. Is there a *body* in there? *Right now?*

She doesn't want to look, but when she glances nervously out the window, rather than the cabin, she meets the eyes of Graham's not-quite-boss. For some reason he's glaring at her, like he thinks she personally snuck out last night, stole a car, and drove all the way here just to--

"Who was it?" she asks as she jerks her eyes away. "Who died?"

Hannibal and Graham look at each other again, and no. *Gods*, please, not--

"The young man from yesterday," Hannibal says, so calmly she could almost believe he knew about it already, except why would he bring her here to spring this on her? "It appears he was the brother of my last tithe."

Oh. So that explains why he'd been so mad at her. If it weren't for her, his sister would still be alive.

She chances another look at the cabin, sees the unknown guy from earlier coming their way, but there's someone new in the doorway: a big man, half again the size of Jack, but instead of out-of-shape, he just looks vaguely wrong. Like he has a pretty decent notion of how a human is supposed to look but crammed too many parts into the mold. His eyes, one slightly higher than the other, are fixed unblinkingly on Hannibal, both hands braced in the doorway like he's two seconds from shoving off, forcing his bulk back into the cabin, and slamming the door between them.

When Hannibal sees her looking, he turns as well, lowering his window as Graham turns the key in the ignition for him.

"Lecter," Agent Smarm greets him with a slight head-tilt back to where the other--Other?--agent hovers nervously. "Before you go, I'm supposed to ask if hyacinth rings any bells."

"With notes of lily and calamus?" He seems terribly unsurprised. "I know the scent, but she's unlikely to be the culprit. Merely a nuisance."

Realization sparks as Agent Smarm heaves a sigh, eyes rolling. "Yeah, I heard that Lounds woman was feeding off this--case," he says, changing his choice of words at the last minute with a swift glance at her in the back. "Kind of surprised you haven't registered her yet, to be honest."

"It's tempting, but the timing is unfortunate," Hannibal admits. He sounds like he's talking about scheduling a vacation, so offhand Abigail can't even work up an ounce of fear, even knowing that could be her, or Dr. Bloom, or anyone.

"Shame. I'm sure a lot of people would be very happy to see the last of that one...and with your track record, I bet no one would look twice. Anyway, keep in touch. We'll do the same."

Graham waits until the window slides up again, but then he just stares. "Is he seriously suggesting you take one for the team because you're the only Other who could get away with it?"

The corners of Hannibal's mouth turn down in a moue of distaste. "Suggesting? No. Implying heavily...?"

"Was he talking about the woman from the hospital?" Abigail asks with a creeping sense of relief. She hadn't wanted to consider Freddie's offer, but she'd spent that morning thinking she was out of options. Now she realizes she dodged a bullet, considering even the cops want Freddie dead.

"Miss Lounds is not popular with many," Hannibal says with careful diplomacy. "Although her sensationalist brand of news does have an avid readership."

"She pretty much single-handedly put the Chesapeake Ripper in the national eye," Graham mutters. "The public likes a spectacle, but the mystique of an uncatchable killer draws a

surprising number of clicks."

"And that's why she wanted to talk to me."

"She's very good at what she does," Dr. Bloom consoles her, "and what she does is get people to tell their stories. She can seem very convincing, I'm sure, but she only has her own best interests at heart."

Abigail shakes her head, staring at her knees. "I knew she was lying about wanting to help. I just didn't think anyone else *would*."

Graham turns around a little more in his seat, eyes rising to her left ear. She'd thought it was guilt that made him avoid her before, but knowing he's just being careful makes her feel a lot better. "You don't have to worry about that. You've got a lot more people in your corner than you think."

She almost believes it until she gets back to the hospital, and when she wakes up the next morning, the news is everywhere. Stares follow her throughout the day, mostly from the other patients, though one or two of the nurses are especially careful around her, like they think they might be next. She manages not to scream during group, but she hangs back at the end, not wanting to walk back with the others and definitely not wanting them at her back if she goes first. It doesn't help.

"I heard it was the brother of one of Lecter's tithes--you know, the stag head girl? Kinda weird that he went after Lecter's witness and ends up dead."

"Not really...I mean, they can kill you over that, you know? Like if someone attacks your husband or your kid."

"But why wouldn't he just use the tithe? It doesn't make sense, unless it wasn't him that did it."

"What, you think...she...?"

"All I'm saying is, she'd know how to do it, right? Maybe she missed it."

"Well, if you ask me, she's cursed." That's a third girl, so certain even Abigail half believes her. She wants to run, but she stays leaned up against the wall, not daring to turn the corner on the hall that leads to their private rooms. The fact that she's become locker room gossip in the nuthouse makes her stomach twist and knot. "One of those people death just follows. Look how many people are willing to kill for her."

"Or die for her."

"Or both," the second girl says gloomily. "Wonder which of us will be next?"

Both hands covering her mouth, Abigail bites back a dozen angry retorts, throat closing in grief. Do they think she wanted this? Any of it? Honestly a curse is the kindest interpretation she's heard yet; at least then it isn't her *fault*. It doesn't change the fact that people keep dying, and somehow she's always at the root of it whether she knows it or not.

She can't stay. She can't walk down that hall and pretend not to have heard those whispers, and the nurses patrol the floor often. They're going to wonder why she's not in her room and she--she can't stay.

It's child's play to slip out onto the grounds and scale the wall, and though she hears a shout far distant at her back, she doesn't stop as she goes over the top and heads straight for the trees. She may not have her dad's gift of disappearing, but she knows how to move in the woods unseen. Part of her just wants to keep going, live off the land and never come back, but she knows what waits in the woods. She's consecrated, not stupid.

It's difficult without internet access, but when she asks at a gas station for someone to call her a cab, the driver knows just where to go.

"I'm sorry," she says once they're underway, deciding to be truthful. "I don't have any money on me, but when we get there--"

He's been glancing back at her since she climbed into the cab; he doesn't seem surprised. "You're the witness, right?" She nods tightly, and he turns his eyes back to the road. "No charge."

She bites her lip. Is everyone going to be scared of her now? But when she climbs out of the cab onto the sidewalk in front of Hannibal's practice, the driver murmurs, "Mother's blessing," and drives off before her startled look can clear.

She doesn't know why she's here or why she even thinks he'll be here so late, but the front door is unlocked. No one answers her hesitant knock on the inner office door, and when she peeks inside, she finds the room lit up and warm, the scent of someone's aftershave--expensive but overpowering, definitely not Hannibal's--lingering. Quiet voices carry through a second door, Hannibal's deep rumble and another man's, this one nervous and quick, anxious for approval. He must be seeing a patient out; he may not have heard her knock at all.

She doesn't want to intrude, but she desperately doesn't want to be sent away. She can hardly name the impulse that has her bolting up a ladder to a library mezzanine, hoping to just hide there for a while. She knows it's dumb; almost nothing gives him away, but she's watching closely, sees the minute twitch of Hannibal's brows as he steps back into the office and catches her scent. His stride doesn't falter, but he hesitates at his desk, flipping open a fancy, hardbound journal without looking up. When she doesn't move, doesn't call out, barely even breathes, he sits down as if ignorant of her presence, giving her her space.

Sinking to the floor, she buries her face in her knees, but a stranger's accusing snarl is all she can see.

"I don't want to go to sleep," she says without picking up her head.

Hannibal puts down his pen, pages ruffling as he closes his journal. "You can't anticipate your dreams."

"I can when I know what they're going to be about," she insists, a touch of hysteria in her tone. "That boy--he's dead because of me, isn't he?"

"You don't know that."

"But they all are. Those girls, my dad, him--it just keeps happening."

"Abigail." It's almost not fair that his voice sounds so soothing. He killed one of those girls himself. For her. "Come down from there."

She hears him rise, but it takes a moment to uncurl from her protective huddle and make her way to the ladder once more. She's wobbly on her feet, trembling like she's the one who committed a murder, but it's all catching up to her now.

All the same, she's grateful for the hand Hannibal offers her on her last steps down, clutching at it like a lifeline.

"I know you didn't do it," she says quickly, brushing the hair from her face with nervous fingers. "I know you didn't kill that boy. But you would have, wouldn't you?"

Hannibal tilts his head a little to the left: curious, not defensive. "If he'd attempted to harm you, yes. As I would've killed Eldon Stammetts but for Will's intervention."

Gods. She hadn't known about that one, but that just makes it worse. "Would--would you have picked Nicholas Boyle for the tithe?"

"If he'd been persistent. I'm within my rights to protect my bond witness, by any means necessary."

"But *why?* Why would anyone kill for *me?"*

A tiny frown she hadn't consciously noticed clears from Hannibal's face. "I can't speak for anyone else, but I find myself unexpectedly attached to both you and Will. I wouldn't knowingly allow harm to come to either of you. As for Will...you should ask him again about your father," he suggests, eyes knowing.

Abigail shakes her head. "Why?"

"Because that's not what you asked. You asked how, but 'how' is all anyone ever asks of Will. How did he do it? How did *they* do it? How did he come by this extraordinary talent? Between Jack's pushing and the sheer number of my colleagues hounding him to take part in their experiments, I'd be very surprised if he heard any question pertaining to his gift as anything but a demand for results."

"Oh," she says in a small voice. So he could have told her what her dad was thinking, or at least what he thought her dad was thinking, if she'd just asked in the right way.

Ducking his head a little to meet her eyes, Hannibal offers, "If it's any consolation, Will has insisted from the beginning that your father acted out of love. Maybe not the sort of love most would understand, but it was the root of all his actions."

And even believing that, Graham had killed him anyway. But that part wouldn't have changed; if it hadn't been Graham, it would've been--

"My dad should've been your tithe this month," she says, voice catching. "That's why you haven't picked one yet. You haven't had time to settle on a new one."

"The boon I agreed to fulfill was seeing to his death," he agrees, choosing his words with care.

"What would you have done if he'd lived? If he'd--if he'd still...and I was still your witness, but Graham didn't shoot him. Would you have still...?"

Hannibal nods once, grave. "I would have had no choice. A tithe once claimed demands a boon in recompense."

"Would you have displayed him?" She feels sick at the thought--her dad would've hated being made a part of one of Hannibal's spectacles--but there's a tiny little voice in the back of her head reminding her that that's not all Hannibal does.

"I would've consulted you on the matter first," Hannibal says firmly. "Your father would not have been someone I would ordinarily have chosen, and I wouldn't have wanted to cause you any distress."

Apart from killing her dad, of course, but--he's right. She *knows* it. She can't even remember when she first learned how the Compact works; it's intrinsic, like how to use a fork or opening an umbrella when it rains. Someone must've taught her, but she can't remember that at all.

She's shivering. When did she start shaking so badly?

When Hannibal rests a gentle hand on her shoulder, she leans into it.

"He'd have--he'd have hated the attention. Being seen. But he--we didn't honor him. Not any part of him. We just *left* him there, and I didn't...I didn't even...."

Another nod, sympathetic. No judgment. No disgust at the terrible place her mind has gone.

"Would you have liked to?"

She's crying now, sobbing like her heart will break, and doesn't fight it when she's pulled in. She knows he can feel it when she nods against his chest, but she can't lie, not now. Not when he looks so supportive, like he'll keep her secrets, even this.

"I'm sorry. I wish I had known sooner."

She shakes her head. What could he even have done? It was too late the moment he arrived, was probably too late for months beforehand, from the moment her dad wronged enough people that they gave up one of their own just to see him dead. Maybe he doesn't deserve to be honored by anyone for what he did, not even by her, much less a child of the Mother. But

he's still her dad. She can't help feeling guilty, knowing he'd have hated this lonely end, the utter waste of everything he was, just as much as he'd have hated being displayed.

For the second time in as many days, Hannibal lets her cry herself out without complaint. She wonders vaguely if he's ever had kids or if they teach you to do this in psychiatrist school; he's too good at it not to have had frequent practice.

Maybe he's been just as unlucky as her, and that's why he cares. She wonders if he got to honor them, whoever they were, and if that's why he *understands*.

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It isn't until he's home again with his dogs and well into the next day that Will is confronted with the gaping hole in his recent routine. Now that Abigail's awake, he can't just go sit with her whenever he has a moment free...and he'd been doing a lot of that lately, to the point where he can maybe, almost, see Jack's perspective on the matter. And now that they've put Jack's suspicions to rest regarding Hobbs' accomplices, he has no real reason to keep up to date on damage control with Hannibal. At loose ends for the first time in weeks, he tries to lose himself in the simple tasks of taking his pack for a walk, tinkering around with an old boat motor he's been refurbishing, but dissatisfaction plucks at the back of his thoughts like an insect struggling against a web.

It's ridiculous. He's been alone all his life--a *loner* all his life. He doesn't need other people to validate his existence. So maybe he misses intelligent conversation with someone who won't give himself whiplash trying to avoid his eyes. It's not like there won't be other cases, and Hannibal had been instrumental in deciphering Stammets' motivations. He'll have plenty of chances to consult with him again.

When he finds himself eyeing his phone, trying to work out how to phrase an invitation to track down Nicholas Boyle's killer together, he scoffs loudly at himself and goes to feed the dogs.

He's not going to examine too closely the automatic smile that grows when his phone rings not half an hour later and he picks up to a familiar voice that isn't Jack's.

"*Hello, Will. I've just had an interesting visitor, and I wondered if you might be free*."

"Well, I'd have to consult my busy social calendar," he quips, all but grinning as he glances around the front room where even the dogs are mostly ignoring him, "but I could be convinced."

"*In that case, have you eaten yet?*"

"I just got done feeding the dogs, but not myself." He just wasn't hungry. It's not only because he's bored.

"*Excellent. My place or yours?*"

"I'd say surprise me, but one of us still has to drive."

Hannibal chuckles, smile audible. "*I'm sure I could manage something. Shall I meet you there in an hour?*"

Well. It seems like he's not the only one who's formed a habit or two.

"I'll keep the light on for you," Will promises, his night improved already.

Chapter End Notes

Another short one, I know--probably should've gone at the end of the last one, but I temporarily forgot about this scene, and it definitely can't go at the beginning of the next one, because that's a jump cut to a different episode. So here, have a tiny update. XD

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he gets the word that he'll be following Jack to Stamford, Connecticut, Will's more puzzled than anything. Not to sound callous, but a simple home invasion wouldn't ordinarily warrant FBI involvement, not this early in the investigation. The violent crimes they handle usually affect whole communities: serial killings, mass shootings, not...what? A burglary gone wrong? Only this close to the holidays, it would've been reasonable for the perpetrators to expect the entire family to be home, and a group bold enough to have forced their way into one inhabited house in broad daylight may have done it before. May do it again. He needs more facts, but he won't get those until he sees the crime scene.

Stamford's a pleasant coastal city hugging the northern shore of the Long Island Sound, where Connecticut thrusts like a slotted tab into the lower edge of New York State. It's a bit touristy, and the waterfront is busier and more affluent than most, suggesting a strong Other population. This close to the haunts of the Deep Ones, a town lives or dies on the tenets of the Compact, the willingness of its Others to translate and intercede. He wonders what Hannibal would make of the place, how thick the air must be with signs of worship Will can only infer.

The address he was given leads him to a nice house in a nice neighborhood, well into the upper end of middle class. If he ignores the police cruisers and patrolling officers, from the outside everything looks normal: a manicured yard, if dry from the lateness of the year; freshly-cleaned windows, all intact; a two-car garage, closed up tight. Even the front door shows no signs of a scuffle.

He can smell the lie in that before he even crosses the threshold, the organic reek of rotting food combining queasily with the scent of death.

"Will," Jack greets him while he's still trying to remember how to breathe through the stench. "Good; you're here."

"Yeah, just a little confused about why I'm here," Will admits through an eye-watering cough. It wakes his headache, every squeeze of his lungs echoing in his brain as if his skull is clenching in time. "Do you think this is the work of a spree killer...?"

"That's what we're hoping you can tell us. From what we've learned so far, the Turner family had no known enemies, no involvement with anything that could lead to this kind of attack. We were invited to look into the case because murder seems to be the only motive; as far as we can tell, nothing's been taken, and whoever forced their way in would've had plenty of time to ransack the place if they wanted to."

"Instead they just broke in, killed the Turner family...and left?"

"Like they had one reason for being here, and that was it. I want to know why."

Well, when he puts it like that, Will's a bit curious as well. He knows by now that Jack's probably expecting to uncover shady dealings or personal vendettas, but bad luck and bad timing can be just as deadly. Maybe someone saw an opportunity and took it.

Or maybe, he thinks as he enters the dining room to see the Turners sitting neatly around a table laid for a holiday dinner...maybe Jack has a point about this being personal.

The forensics team are already prowling the room, gathering pictures and evidence, but either they know by now not to touch the bodies or Jack's kept them away. The Turners--two adults and two kids--are all slumped over in place, their heads falling into their otherwise empty dinner plates, but there's no ropes keeping any of them in place. So there wasn't just one attacker--the others would've scattered when the first shot was fired, maybe tried to grapple with a lone gunman--but there's only one extra place setting, conspicuously laid at the head of the table. Did someone from this little get-together go missing after the triggers were pulled, or was someone invited in?

Slipping on a pair of gloves, he pulls out the chair set between Mr. and Mrs. Turner. Gold flashes before his closed eyes as he imagines the clock turning backwards, the present fading out and slipping away. Blood soaks up through the stiff tablecloth and reverses its spill, filling four plates before draining to nothing. Mrs. Turner stares at him the entire time with a sad resignation he can't look at for long. So he doesn't look.

Table has been set. Family dinner, he notes with a wry smile, nostalgia he can't connect with in any personal sense warming the space behind his ribs. His smile falls away almost instantly. *I wasn't invited. I take my seat at the head of the table. My seat...my place setting next to Mrs. Turner.* And her husband, yes, but he's not important. Like the others, he'd died face down in a plate of gore. Mrs. Turner is the only one turned his way. He can feel her eyes boring holes in his face.

I am the guest of honor. Nobody's taken a bite of their dinner.

Nothing's been touched at all, like the killers knew exactly when to expect lunch on the table, though they didn't even stay for the first course.

He points at the older of the two girls, pretty and perfect like her pretty, perfect mother who *won't stop staring at him*. The others keep their faces pointed straight ahead until the little girl looks hesitantly his way. "If you don't eat your growing foods," he warns, "you won't get any dessert."

A floret of steamed broccoli appears on her fork, and she chews dry-mouthed, obedient, nearly choking on it.

He can feel the anger--no, the *power*--rising in him, fizzing up through his blood. He slams his fist down, hard enough to make the silverware jump. *No one leaves the table. All afraid to move. Even the little ones behave themselves.*

The youngest is brown-haired like her father, sitting like a mirror opposite her sister. There's a picture-perfect symmetry to this homey little scene: man and wife, dark and fair. So why

the fifth plate? Why had this unexpected guest inserted themselves into their lives? And was this filling an absence in them or in him?

I brought my own family to this home invasion, controlling the Turners with threats of violence. Threats that turn to action.

Gunshots, three of them. Bodies slump over to take up their places once more as the white tablecloth stains red. Mrs. Turner doesn't flinch, doesn't move.

The Turner family is executed simultaneously, with the exception of Mrs. Turner-- He has to. Has to look, head turning by slow degrees. Her eyes bore into him like there's something she's trying to communicate, but he's not hearing it. He can't. He won't. *--who dies last.*

"This is my design," he tells her in something close to a whisper: a confession, a cruelty, a promise.

I shoot Mrs. Turner.

Her gaze doesn't waver even as he raises the gun, not until her head snaps back, her body hits the back of her chair and slumps forward, and even then, she's still turned his way. Like he's the last thing she wants to see even as the lights go out.

Jack's voice startles him out of his staring match, only to realize his eyes are still closed. When he opens them, the first thing he sees is Mrs. Turner's blind gaze staring a hole through his sternum, and he jerks his eyes away quickly. It wouldn't be the first time he's seen the eyes of a corpse roll up to meet his own, but he tries to avoid that whenever possible.

"What do you see, Will?"

"Family values," he says when he remembers how words work, barely glancing at Jack. His gift's too close to the surface right now, ready to spill out everywhere. The more eyes he can avoid right now, the better.

"Whose family values?"

Will clenches his jaw. If his gift were that precise, he wouldn't even need Jack, would he? He shakes his head, keeping that thought firmly behind his teeth where it belongs.

Jack takes a deep breath through his nose and lets it out on a sigh. Will feels his disappointment like a rusty blade dragging along his insides, scraping him thin. "All right. Karen and Roger Turner. Childhood sweethearts," Jack lists off as he starts to circle the table, retrieving an already-dogeared report from a sideboard hosting a small congregation of family photos. "Owned a successful real estate business. Pillars of the community. Three children."

"Minus one," Will notes as he rises, vacating the seat that's now been twice usurped as quickly as he can.

"A son," Jack fills in, flipping to the second page on his clipboard. "Jesse. Disappeared last year. Last confirmed sighting had him boarding an RV at a rest stop on Route 47. Possible

runaway, probable abduction."

"Or both," Will puts in, knowing how quickly a spur of the moment decision can become permanent.

Gravitating to the photographs, now spattered and streaked with blood, Will finds who he's looking for easily: front and center, gone but not forgotten. The kid's young, eleven or maybe twelve, with thick, dark hair in an unflattering bowl cut and dark-framed glasses. There's something unbelievably staged about the photo, from the wide lapels of his dress shirt and the tie tucked under his cardigan to his straight white teeth bared in a bashful smile. Kids as a rule take terrible pictures, but the cock of his head, the way it wants to disappear into his shoulders...it isn't just that he doesn't want to be there.

Will wonders about the black band on the boy's left arm, whether it's a coincidence of fashion, a mark of mourning, or something else. He's wearing the same outfit in the family group photo, but neither of his sisters' left arms are visible, his older sister's arm cut out of the photo entirely. Bad camera work or something more deliberate?

"When misery rains, it pours," Jack says heavily, letting the clipboard drop to tap twice against his thigh.

"False faces in family portraits," Will mutters half to himself. Photographs are usually safe--safer than paintings, ironically enough--but he still gets flashes sometimes when their gazes lock, hints of what lies beneath. The girls give him nothing, too young or too content for resentment or regrets. The dad's eyes hold only a dim flicker of mingled smugness and anxiety, the chronic malady of the middle-aged middle class, and his wife's are brimming with the focused steel of a confirmed soccer mom. Jesse, though...the kid looks somehow displaced, like someone from the wrong era, like he knows it and feels the wrongness in every cell of his body. "Layers and layers of lies betrayed by...a sad glint in a child's eyes."

"Norman Rockwell with a bullet," Jimmy quips as he crouches to take another photo, dragging Will's focus back to the present.

Jack stares for half a beat before turning away, shaking off Will's strangeness like water from a dog's coat. "All right, any signs of forced entry?"

"No broken windows or torn screens," Beverly offers. "It's all sealed up tight."

"Yeah, they probably rang the front door," Jack huffs, waving a hand towards the foyer.

Beverly nods once, mouth tight. "I got bullet holes on the upper sections of the wall, and again over here."

"Okay," Jack says, eyes following where she points. "Pull the slugs for ballistics."

"If they aren't frangible, it shouldn't be a problem."

"Those elevated termination points match what I'm seeing with these bodies," Zeller says, Will listening with half an ear as he scans over those photos again and...stops. "Angular

cranial impact coupled with acute exit wounds, conical spray. Shooter went low to high. Probably crouching."

Jesse again, with his mom. He's lying down, head and shoulders in her lap, with her leaning over him to plant a kiss on his brow. There's some heavy-handed symbolism there echoing tired iconography, Mrs. Turner cast as the mother of the sacrifice on the eve of the ritual. A mockery of a toy rests on Jesse's chest: a plush creature with entirely too many arms to comfort any human child unless the locals are more tolerant of their Others than Will's ever seen. Maybe the family is devout...or the parents are, at least. He's at least sure the Turners are thoroughly human; they wouldn't even be here if they weren't. Others police themselves, and after Hannibal's recent reminder, he suspects even Jack will mind his manners on that front, at least for a while.

Will closes his eyes and takes a steadying breath. "When was Jesse abducted?" He is suddenly, achingly tired.

Jack, knees bent to match Zeller's point of view, straightens with a frown. "A little over a year ago."

He hopes he's wrong, that what he's seeing is just some oddball local joke, or that a year is enough time to blunt the sting of...what? What kind of expectations had Jesse's parents loaded onto those narrow shoulders to be conditioning him for *this?*

Fully aware of the irony, he wishes Hannibal were there. Maybe he'd have a more charitable explanation than anything Will can come up with for normalizing the Deep Ones to your firstborn son. A son who may have resented it, fought against it, run away from it.

And who might, in classic, prodigal form, have returned.

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The drive out to Wolf Trap is a pleasant one, even this late in the year. True to his roots, Hannibal appreciates cities mainly for the opportunities to hunt and blend in. The route to Will's home takes him past open fields and stands of trees, little pockets of wilderness clinging stubbornly for a foothold: all things he's missed from his boyhood home. He imagines the colors are riotous in the fall, soothing and cozy in greener months, but for now the fallow fields and the bare branches of the trees at the property line drape a sleepy isolation over everything he sees. He could almost imagine himself the only living presence in the world, and though the thought is a peaceful one to him, he wonders if Will has ever shared that sentiment.

Judging by the pack he's surrounded himself with, likely not.

By the time Hannibal coasts to a stop at the end of the long driveway, the dogs are already alert, a few standing up on their hind legs to peer out the windows. Once he steps from the car, the larger ones' barks taper off, recognizing him from his last two visits. The ones not tall enough to spot him mostly follow their packmates' lead, but the voice of the one Will introduced as Buster never falls silent, circling the front room in an ecstasy of barking.

Who? Who is it? I will bite! Who is it? Bite!

Hannibal's mouth twitches as he unfolds the top of the bag of treats he brought. He's quite fond of the little dog's ferocity, so ingrained it almost seems like an afterthought.

Bite, bite, bite, Buster chuffs joyously, trotting over with his tail whipping his flanks as Hannibal lets himself in with Will's key.

"Indeed," Hannibal greets him, smile breaking free. "I hope you'll pardon the intrusion. Will asked me to stop by while he's out of town."

They don't really understand him, wouldn't even if he tried with the mental speech most humans seem to be deaf to, even their telepaths. He's not even certain they understand Will's name; it isn't likely Will would ever have referred to himself in that fashion for the dogs to have learned it. They still look to the door and then back to him, ears pricking expectantly.

Pack-friend? asks Harley, the largest of the seven, an orange female with a white chest and two white paws.

Pack, Winston echoes softly, like the concept isn't quite concrete, though he seems to have settled in with the others well enough. Buster snuffles companionably into Winston's ear with a sneeze.

"He'll be back soon," Hannibal reassures them, trusting his tone to convey more than his words. "In the meantime...a little something before dinner?"

That's a word they all know, and Hannibal doesn't bother hiding his pleasure as the pack devours the sausages he brought. It's nothing he can blame on his blood--his Mother's children aren't keen on sharing, and his Father's brood would rather feed their schemes than their stomachs--but he can't deny a visceral satisfaction as he watches them consume what he gives them.

Afterwards he lets them out to run while he sees to their dinner proper, unsurprised to find Will makes his own dog food. It dovetails neatly with everything else he knows about the man, the level of care he dedicates to others in marked contrast to how careless he is with himself.

As he waits for the dogs to return, Hannibal makes an idle circuit of the front room. Not much has changed since his previous visit, when he'd brought Will dinner and news of Abigail's unexpected arrival on his doorstep. The rusted boat motor may have had a few more layers of grime stripped away, and the fly-tying equipment has been tidied somewhat. A tickle of warmth creeps in when he spots the lure Will talked him through making, the hook stuck through a piece of cork and set aside on a nearby shelf, as if Will means to keep it.

Despite the disorder Hannibal might have expected from seven dogs, the floor is swept clean, the bed still made, though he wonders again at the presence of it. Perhaps it isn't so strange. More than one patient has expressed anxiety regarding their bedrooms, not due to any trauma associated with the space but because of what might lurk beyond those safe walls, their fear of the unseen turning what should be a sanctuary into a prison. It wouldn't surprise him to

learn that Will has shrunk his life down to as few rooms as possible to keep the shadows in his mind at bay.

As tempting as it is to head upstairs and satisfy his curiosity, he has a second reason for traveling to Wolf Trap that won't wait. When the dogs return, he locks up after himself and leaves them to their dinner. Outside the sun is already setting, the soft rustle of the evening breeze through dry grass and the hum of the highway the only sounds. He closes his eyes, breathes in deep, and listens, for once letting the myriad scents that drift past him fade into the background. If Will has been visited by one of the Favored, not even Hannibal's nose will catch the intruder in the act, but there are other tells.

Making his way methodically around the outside of the house, he looks for signs of forced entry, for malicious sigils that might draw things eager to prey on the unsuspecting. He hasn't visited often enough for his own scent to frighten off lesser creatures or warn other broods away, but the doors and windows appear undisturbed, and there's no tickle of disquiet from his knowing sense to betray a trap.

It's not half as reassuring as it could be.

As night falls in earnest, he returns to the car but doesn't immediately climb inside. He could hunt while he's here, get a feel for the territory and the broods that call it home. There's also the matter of this month's tithe, a decision he's put off long enough. He suspects Will might find it a relief to have the matter shelved for the moment, temptation set safely out of reach.

Truth be told, Will's hands-off approach suits him just fine. He has no interest in being made into a weapon or a hunting hound, finds the transactional nature of the Compact distasteful at best. The idea of being *aimed*, against his preference and his will, ignites a slow-burning ire in his core...and *yet*.

There's something deeply fascinating about Will, hints of a hunter shackled tightly to his control. The sheer violence of his antipathy towards Freddie Lounds, his protective streak and how easily he slipped from distrust to acceptance of Hannibal's nature...Will's a puzzle Hannibal's eager to see more of, certain it won't disappoint. And if Will were to come to him one day and suggest Miss Lounds has overstayed her welcome....

He doesn't think he'd find it insulting in the least to sit down with Will and plot that out, the demise and the design.

He thinks he might like that very much indeed.

***

Abigail wakes up early for her twice-weekly session with Dr. Bloom, showers and brushes her hair carefully, and spends a good twenty minutes dithering over her clothes. Sober blues or muted greys? Does she want to pass for more adult or hope for invisibility?

Scarf on or scarf off?

Dr. Bloom might be a friend of Hannibal's, but she's got too much control over Abigail's life to risk going into one of their sessions without every weapon at her disposal honed and ready.

She's dressed and sitting on the edge of her bed when someone knocks on her door, and she takes a deep breath to steady herself. She can do this. She's been talking to psychiatrists for weeks now, but they can't keep her here forever. She just has to watch herself, give them nothing but facts and not let herself be drawn into any what-if scenarios designed to trip her up. She can't afford to start second-guessing herself now.

Clearing her throat, she calls, "Come in."

A nurse opens the door for Dr. Bloom but then fades away, leaving the two of them alone. Since her trip over the wall, the staff keeps a close eye on her, but they seem to trust Dr. Bloom to keep her in check.

"Hi, Abigail," Dr. Bloom greets her with a warm smile. She's still wrapped up in her winter coat, makes no move to shrug out of it even when she steps inside. "How was your weekend?"

"Boring...which I guess is good, considering," Abigail replies with a nervous twitch of a smile.

"It certainly can be, though I'd argue 'peaceful' would be the better option. Have you tried any of the activities here, or...?"

Abigail scoffs before she can swallow it, rolling her eyes to hide how she can't meet Dr. Bloom's sympathetic gaze. "Not really. They do pretty much everything here in a group, or in the 'Activity Room,'" she huffs, making air quotes. "I'd rather just come back to my room and read."

Dr. Bloom frowns. "Have there been any more incidents like the last time?"

"Not where I can hear, unless you count all the whispering and weird looks. I'm pretty sure they're all just waiting for Hannibal to choose a tithe to see whether I'll be invited to dinner."

Dr. Bloom's mouth goes tight, rueful understanding darkening her eyes. "I'm afraid that's something you might have to get used to," she says, surprising Abigail into listening. "Not because of your background, but his. You might have heard that Hannibal likes to throw dinner parties...?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure everybody knows that. The headlines are...."

"Sensational? Rude? Frankly offensive?" Dr. Bloom throws out with a wry look. "Try attending one and hearing all that from your fellow guests, right there at the table. Only when Hannibal's out of earshot, of course."

"You're not serious," Abigail says flatly. Dr. Bloom quirks a brow in response. "But--why would they even go if they think...? And why would he *invite* them?" The majority of Others have sharper senses than most humans, and in one of the Mother's children? He can probably

hear them just fine, even from another room. And the gods know he's quiet enough they'd never hear him coming, not quickly enough to censor themselves.

Dr. Bloom takes a deep breath through her nose and lets it out on a sigh. "You'd have to ask him about his motivations, but...Hannibal occupies a unique position amongst the Other population. The Registry considers him something of an ambassador--proof that even the most incorrigible of the broods can lead peaceful, productive lives under the Compact. And to his fellow Others, *he's* the thing that goes bump in the night...or would be, if he weren't so civilized."

Abigail almost doesn't believe it. He's so calm, with a palpable air of control that permeates every room he enters, but she remembers vividly the terror on the misshapen face of the Shoggoth at her family's cabin, the way he'd been primed to bolt at one wrong look from Hannibal.

"So...he's trying to set both sides as ease, and the humans are being weird about it?" And maybe the Others are too, but she hasn't seen him around many of those. Maybe the Registry's sniffer would've relaxed if he'd actually given Hannibal a chance.

"Well...to be fair, these particular humans are very rich."

Abigail snorts, unwillingly amused. "And the very rich are very weird. Got it."

Dr. Bloom smiles. "People have always had opinions about Hannibal's friends. How much weight you give those opinions is up to you, but it's not something you're likely to escape."

She nods, still frowning, but she knows good advice when she hears it. "Thanks. I mean...at least now I can tell myself that it may not even be about me."

"Just be prepared for a lot of awful questions," Dr. Bloom commiserates, shaking her head.

"Like I don't get enough of those already," Abigail huffs, aiming for a joking tone. She's not sure she succeeds. "Someone here asked me if I kept my stained clothes."

"How did that make you feel?"

It's a textbook question, a jarring reminder that Dr. Bloom might be friendly, but she's not a friend. Sudden anger wells up, and though she wants to sound cool and collected and over it all, she can't help the bite in her tone. "Like I wanted to go home. But I don't have a home anymore, do I?"

She's fishing a little--for information, for sympathy--but the answer she gets isn't the one she expects.

"You will. You will--I'll help you find it."

She doesn't frown, doesn't even narrow her eyes, but it's close.

Why would she need Dr. Bloom's help when she has Hannibal?

***

"Alana," Hannibal greets his visitor warmly, holding his office door open as he steps aside. "Come in, please. Everything still on course with Abigail?"

"Not as well as I'd like," Alana says with a faint grimace, setting her coat aside as she makes for the couch by the windows. Facing off like opponents in mirrored chairs has never been her style. "The grief work, the trauma intervention...it's hard to get a good read on how she's progressing when she bottles up so much inside. And she's not really participating in the group sessions, beyond the bare minimum. I think she might be struggling with a low-grade depression."

"Understandable," Hannibal replies from the sidebar, casting a glance over his shoulder as he pours them each a drink. "But perhaps not unexpected. Will's impression was that Abigail is a loner. I suspect she'd struggle in a group setting even if her peers hadn't managed to lose her trust."

"True," Alana says glumly, accepting the tall glass Hannibal hands her with a sigh. "Professional neutrality be damned. It's so hard to watch a bright young girl go so adrift."

"Spending each day immersed in tragedy may be doing more harm than good," Hannibal says as he takes a seat on Alana's left. "Perhaps it's time Abigail's released from clinical treatment."

As much as he dislikes being at the mercy of his instincts, he can't deny that having his witness in the hands of strangers leaves him uneasy at best. Though it would present new challenges, not least having such a vulnerable target so close to him, having her more directly under his protection would relieve a quiet, persistent itch at the back of his thoughts.

Alana hesitates, tone cautious when she replies. "Released where?"

"Here, of course. Or with Will; I believe we each have plenty of room, although he may have an unfair advantage if Abigail happens to be fond of dogs."

His attempt at levity falls flat in the face of Alana's slight wince, the downturn of her mouth. "Hannibal...this is a girl who was very attached to her parents. I understand that you're her guardians--"

"And will remain so, regardless of her age. Abandonment is not an option."

"I'm just not certain she's ready to consider anyone as a surrogate, even you. And besides...." She hesitates, closes her mouth, then seems to think better of it. "When I said what I was going to say in my head, it sounded really insulting, so I'm going to find another way to say it."

Interesting. Alana has her blind spots, but she's one of the most tolerant humans Hannibal knows. "Not at all. I take no insult from advice honestly offered."

Alana's mouth twitches, something kind growing in her eyes. "Dogs keep a promise a person can't," she says gently.

Hannibal stills in surprise. He'd assumed any objections she might have concerning Abigail's care would center around him, not Will. Hearing otherwise leaves him strangely off-kilter. "He hasn't collected another stray, Alana. And he wouldn't be doing this alone."

"No, of course not," she says quickly, but she doesn't sound entirely convinced. "It's just...despite the stress of his gift, Will has managed to set good boundaries in his life that have created a pocket of stability for him."

"Until recently?" Hannibal hazards a guess. She wouldn't be worried if she believed her own words.

Alana's mouth twists unhappily. She doesn't mention Jack by name, but her irritated gaze is too distant for Hannibal to be the culprit. "Until recently. I just worry that his expectations might be unrealistic. That this thing the three of you have might be a desperate clutch for stability...and that he won't be prepared for the consequences when reality sets in."

Hannibal wants to object, but he's not entirely certain which facet in particular she doesn't trust. If she doubts the unexpected ease between himself and Will will hold strong, the way they work together so seamlessly he finds himself wondering what it would be like to hunt beside the man, when he's done so alone his entire--

"He killed her father, Hannibal. How's he going to take it if Abigail decides she wants nothing more to do with him after that?"

***

"I'm glad we didn't have guns in my house," Zeller says with forced lightness. "Would've shot my sisters just to get them out of the bathroom."

With their morbid holiday bounty safely delivered to the FBI labs, the forensics team have taken posts along the walls, waiting as Jack makes his own round of the steel tables, checking clipboards and peering under cloths. Will watches the ritual in silence, waiting in the back by the wall of morgue lockers, on standby like the others but not keen to draw anyone's attention. His headache had eased up on the trip back, but the bright fluorescent lights, the mingled scents of chemicals and decay--something is setting his head off again, but if he has any more aspirin right now, they'll be investigating his stomach lining next when it finally gives up the ghost.

Jack doesn't laugh at Zeller's attempt at humor, but Beverly jumps right in, fearless. "I liked having a big family."

"My parents gave me a gift: a twin," Price offers with a smirk. "Who wouldn't want two of me?"

Zeller turns to Will but doesn't wait to see if he'll speak up on his own. "Let me guess. Only child."

He's tired. Physically tired, tired of being in pain, and tired of scenes like the one in Connecticut. It's the only excuse he has for not shutting that line of questioning down immediately. "Why do you say that?"

"'Cause family friction is usually a catalyst for personality development."

Will doesn't even know what to say to that. People have usually had about enough of his personality within five minutes of meeting him; he doesn't think he's ever been accused of being *deficient* in that department in his life. Just because Zeller doesn't like what's on offer--

"I was the oldest," Beverly says before Will's silence can get awkward, "so all the friction rolled downhill." The smile she tosses Will is kind, but the look she aims at Zeller is a warning. Once a big sister, always a big sister; Zeller doesn't look completely chastened, but it shuts him right up.

"Yes, all the attention and responsibilities heaped on firstborn children prepares them for success in the future," Jack says, oblivious to the tension in the room or just dismissive of it. Jack seems like the kind of guy who'd leave his people to sort out their own pecking order so long as he's firmly at the top of it at the end of the day.

"My baby sister got away with murder," Beverly mutters, the echoes of a decades-old annoyance in the twist of her mouth. "She had them all fooled."

"I thought middles were the problem," Price says as Jack takes up his case file again, finally turning his back on the tables.

Zeller grins, smug. "Middle's the sweet spot."

"Always trying to figure out where they fit in. They can be great politicians...or lousy ones," Will deadpans. He carefully doesn't look at Beverly. Just because he's never had an older sibling himself doesn't mean he's immune to their quelling looks.

"All the victims have defensive wounds except for Mrs. Turner," Jack cuts in, breaking up their nascent squabble by handing Will a black and white photo: a dead woman's head on a plate. The one eye he can see--not counting the sham of a third bored into her skull--stares mildly into the infinite, settled. Calm.

"There's forgiveness," Will realizes aloud, not worried for once that Mrs. Turner will change her focus to glare up at him instead, dead eyes demanding answers or explanations or other things he can't provide.

Jack frowns. "What kind of victim forgives the killer at the moment of death?"

He almost wants someone to tell him he's wrong, that that isn't how families work, actually, but he knows what he knows. "A mother."

No one argues, but Jack does stop him on his way out the door.

"One second, Will, before you take off."

"Sure, Jack," Will says, rubbing tiredly at his eyes. The darkness behind his closed lids is soothing after the high-intensity overheads spotlighting the lab tables, but he blinks his eyes obediently open when Jack looms beside him. "What's up?"

"Sheldon Isley. Baltimore City Council. Ring any bells?"

"Should it?" Will asks with a half-apologetic grimace. "I'm, uh...not really up on city-level politics, sorry." He's doing good to keep up with Virginia's local elections; Maryland isn't even his state.

"Well, this one won't be up for another term. He's Hannibal's newest tithe. Found this morning in a parking lot; apparently Hannibal's already paid for the damages."

"Damages?" Will parrots, shaking his head. "To what--the parking lot?"

"He should probably watch that," Jack says, pulling out his phone and pulling up a bookmark before handing it over. "You and I both know there's a lot of leeway granted when it comes to crimes committed in the course of fulfilling a boon, but this? Is not that."

The parking lot is empty of cars but far from vacant. Rising out of the thin fog of early dawn, a tree in unseasonal bloom thrusts up from shattered asphalt, flowers bursting from its trunk. Or rather, from the trunk of the man grafted into the tree, his torso cut open and innards scooped out. It's beautiful, and though he knows he should be horrified at the utter lack of remorse in the display, he's mostly appalled at himself for seeing the artistry instead of the loss of life. In his defense--if there could be any--Hannibal has gone all out this time.

"And...you're sure this wasn't the boon? He did double up on that with the last one...."

"No, but it could've been," Jack admits with a snort. "There were thirty-four boons calling for Isley's removal from office two years ago, whether by intimidation or blackmail, and one particularly irate filing where death would've been just as acceptable. Seems that parking lot used to be an important nesting habitat for endangered songbirds. Isley brokered the development deal over the disapproval of the EPA, so...better late than never, I guess."

"Yeah, well...when you can only choose a dozen a year, I guess you have to make them--wait. Did you ask me because you thought I put Hannibal up to this?"

Jack shrugs. "It seemed like a reasonable question, considering there were animals involved."

"Unbelievable," Will mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose. He wants to be furious, but he just doesn't have the energy for it. "Hannibal's tithes are between him and the Registry, Jack. I have no control over who he chooses, and I don't want any."

"Still. You wouldn't be the first person to bond to an Other and discover a penchant for...let's say activism."

"Let's not," Will grumbles, prickly now and regretting that he stopped at all. "And Hannibal's not in any trouble for...tearing up the parking lot? The tree?"

"Parking lot, and he probably would be, except if the owners drag him to court, it's just going to mean a lot of bad press, environmentally speaking. Hell, he'd probably let them just to rub their noses in it when he settles."

That...does sound like Hannibal, true. And now he's curious--if that wasn't the boon, what was? He'd ask, but he's got more important questions, such as why Hannibal waited until he was out of the state to settle on a tithe at all. Was that meant as consideration for his delicate human sensibilities? An unwillingness to test how far Will's tolerance stretches? Or simple damage control, an attempt to keep more people from asking the same question Jack had?

He's tired. He misses his dogs. He doesn't *need* to stop by Hannibal's place first; the key he'd given the man had been a spare. But the urge to get this all out in the open now is a tempting one, and it refuses to let him go.

When he calls, Hannibal is with a patient. It's nearly half an hour before he gets a text in response, a simple: *I'll come to you, if you don't mind. I might be running late*. Reflexive stubbornness nearly has him firing back 'Is this because of the tithe?' except...yeah, it may be. Only less because of how it'd look to outsiders, him showing up for dinner that very evening, and more because Hannibal would think it rude. Like serving himself fish, as Hannibal himself would say, when dining with someone opposed to the--

Will's gut clenches at the thought of walking into Hannibal's dining room and catching traces of the last meal to be served there, the urge to argue fading.

The dogs are ecstatic to see him home, licking at his hands and running circles around him, but he doesn't miss the furtive glances they cast at the door. "I knew he was going to spoil you," Will chuckles, ruffling Winston's shaggy coat.

It's a little after eight before Hannibal shows up, a suspicious but predictable paper bag in hand. Will shakes his head but can't quite bring himself to scold Hannibal in earnest. "If you keep bringing them food, they're going to lose all the manners they ever had," he warns as he lets the man in, trying not to smile.

Hannibal pauses, though he's foregone shucking out of his nice winter coat, currently unanointed by dog hair, in favor of giving the pack their treats. "If it'd undermine your training, I'll stop."

He should say yes. But Hannibal always looks so purely delighted, he just can't find it in him to be the bad guy here. "Maybe just dial it back to every other visit," he suggests, rubbing sheepishly at the back of his neck. "Wouldn't want to ruin all your fun."

Hannibal smiles, chin tucked just fractionally to his chest as he turns half away, back to the dogs. "It's certainly gratifying to see my cooking appreciated so unreservedly."

It'd be reasonable to ask, knowing what ingredients graced Hannibal's kitchen so recently. But Hannibal knows him, knows his preferences. He can't claim to trust the man and second-guess him at every turn.

"Yeah, well... you won't have any problems getting anyone from this house to your table. But I'm guessing you came to mine tonight for a reason...?"

Hannibal nods, looking back to Will but aiming his eyes politely just a degree off. Will could shift a little to the left and meet Hannibal's gaze if he wanted; it's still odd to know that Hannibal wouldn't immediately recoil if he did.

"There would be talk. There will *always* be talk. Not just about Abigail. I wasn't certain how you wanted to handle it."

"By ignoring it, is what I'd like to say, but it might be too late for that. Jack took me aside today to ask whether I'd sicced you on Isley. Seven dogs," he reminds at Hannibal's frown. "Apparently my bleeding heart might've branched out."

Hannibal's eyes widen slowly, lighting up with such unabashed awe and delight, Will briefly loses his entire train of thought. It takes a solid beat for him to realize what he just said, and then he drops his head with a groan.

"Why, Will--"

"Stop."

"I had no idea we were so compatible."

"I am not picking up your murder humor," Will insists with a grimace.

"Although," Hannibal muses, deaf to Will's protests, "I suppose the marriage might've been a clue."

The laugh that bursts out of Will is quiet, unpracticed but honest. Some part of him still can't believe this accidental bond is working as well as it is, but at the end of the day, Hannibal has a point.

"Yeah, Couple of the Year material, that's us," he jokes right back, shaking his head. "Guess we're a bit overdue for one of the relationship talks, though."

"The tithe," Hannibal says, tucking away his smile, though his eyes don't gain that careful distance Will has seen there before.

Will nods. "I think I've been pretty clear that who you choose and what you do with them is up to you. But you don't have to wait for me to clear out of town, either. I mean, I'd rather you didn't step in on an active investigation--and if I ever sound like I'm changing my mind about that, *please* just put it down to my lousy temper and ignore me. It's...hard to step back sometimes. Especially this close to the holidays," he adds in a low mutter, reminded all over again of how that perfect little Yule card family met its end.

Hannibal tilts his head, curious. "Has something happened? During your current case? You haven't mentioned it at all yet."

Will scrubs a hand over his mouth, uncertain. "You sure you want to get me started? We're past office hours, and I don't think you signed up for this."

"Of course I did," Hannibal says, lacing his hands behind his back with that genteel little bow he employs when he politely refuses to be kept at arm's length. "I believe there's even a witness to prove it."

Will snorts, but he waves an arm at the room's most comfortable chair, simultaneously holding a hand out for Hannibal's coat. "Suit yourself. Can I get you anything? There's coffee, whiskey, water, and juice."

"Whatever you're having will be fine," Hannibal assures him, handing over his coat and picking his way through the dogs with ease, mindful of paws underfoot. He doesn't even hesitate to sit, though he'll probably stand up with a fine dusting of fur. Will keeps his place neat, vacuums often, but pet hair is just a fact of life, as all-pervasive as the Compact.

It's too late for coffee, and Hannibal drove, so whiskey might not be the best idea either. He pours them each a few fingers anyway, trusting Hannibal to know his limits. "I'll be honest," he says as he hands the glass over, "I'm still not sure how we got involved this early. There's the potential there for something bigger, but...I don't know. Someone in the Other community may have pushed for it; it looked like some plans may have gotten disrupted once already."

"What makes you say that?" Hannibal doesn't tense at the insinuation, nothing but curiosity looking back at him when Will darts a glance at his face.

"The family photos," Will says, dropping tiredly to sit at the foot of the bed. "The Turners had a son--middle child, but firstborn boy. I think they were desensitizing him, preparing him for the Deep Ones."

"As a sacrifice?"

"Or an acolyte. Or an ambassador, or an emissary," Will says with a helpless shrug. "Who knows? The kid ran away last year, and he'd be the only one left to ask. The rest of the family were killed in a home invasion; sat down to a family dinner with a few guests they didn't expect. And maybe one they did," he adds quietly, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, staring into his untouched glass.

"And who were the Turners?"

"No one, really. They were in real estate. PTA, dance recitals. Just a completely normal family...except for Jesse."

Hannibal nods thoughtfully, reaching down to stroke Buster's head when the little dog approaches, tail wagging. "This boy. You think he's important to the case?"

"I don't know what to think," he admits, sitting back and taking a deep swallow of his drink with a sigh. "There were no signs of forced entry, not even a struggle until the end. Whoever killed them, they knew them, or at least one of them. I don't *want* to think Jesse had anything to do with it, but...."

"Those photographs?"

Will nods. "Posed like a *Celebrant with Child*. And they killed Mrs. Turner last."

"It's a lot of pressure to put on anyone, even if her only ambitions were secular--and required a living son."

"I thought so too, just...not sure I can trust what I think on a case like this." Will shakes his head. "There's something so foreign about family...like an ill-fitting suit. I never connected to the concept."

While hardly disinterested before, the familiar feline intensity returns to Hannibal's posture, keen interest in the tilt of his head. "Was your voice lost amidst a horde of siblings?"

"No. It was just me and my dad. And neither of us were big talkers."

"And your mother wasn't in the picture."

"I never knew her. I'm not even sure when she left," he adds, listening in disbelief as the words come tumbling out. It's not something he usually cares to discuss; he knows the questions sure to follow. *What was she? Did you get it from her? Are you sure?* "My dad never talked about her. It was early enough that my knowledge of mothers is...to borrow a phrase...largely anecdotal."

"And yet, despite the lack of personal examples, you've created a family for yourself."

"Well, I connected a family of strays," Will protests half-heartedly. "And thank you for feeding them while I was away."

Hannibal arches a brow. "My pleasure--but I was referring to Abigail. And by extension, me."

The idea shouldn't be a shocking one--they're essentially co-parents, partners in most senses of the word--but somehow it startles him enough to jerk his eyes up, unguarded. Hannibal's loose shields keep him from reading too deep, but they can't obscure the quiet wistfulness that lurks beneath Hannibal's measured stare.

Hannibal has had a family before, and some part of him mourns its lack even now.

"Have you...ever had children?" he asks before he can think better of it, fingers curling around the memory of a small, cool hand sliding into his own.

"No," Hannibal says, eyes darkening with old pain as they slide away to stare out the windows behind Will. "I had a sister, once. Much smaller than me. You could say I was like a second father to her. But Mischa died along with our parents."

Will frowns. He knows from what Hannibal has said that the Lecters were childless, but she could have been human. Having taken in one child, his adoptive parents could easily have done it again. Something tells him that isn't the case. "Was she like you?"

The tiniest of smiles steals like a ghost over Hannibal's mouth, flirting with detection but never quite becoming clear. "We were whelped together, in fact. I woke first, but...she smelled like me. Like mine. She was the first thing I knew from the moment I became aware, and I knew that we were kin, and that I wanted to keep her.

"My siblings didn't understand. My sister was always small, weak even by human standards. Even our Mother was surprised. She put it down to our Father's influence; His children cleave together when young, finding safety in numbers instead of devouring each other to grow stronger. If His blood didn't run so strongly in both of us, maybe things would have been different. But we were very much outcasts until the Lecters invited us into their family."

Will can see it even without resorting to his gift: a much younger Hannibal coming to a snap decision and then single-mindedly defending it against every comer. Rejecting half his birthright to keep his sister safe, even though it would've been smarter for his own survival to give in. He must have known; his own gift would have told him, even if his siblings kept quiet. Will suspects Hannibal's siblings did no such thing.

It almost makes sense now: why Hannibal didn't try harder to avoid the bond, why his instincts drive him so fiercely, even why he's willing to hold his head up and claim Will despite his humanity. Humans had given him the one thing he seems to value above all else; his own blood had taken it away.

"Well, you certainly fit in with this family," Will throws out as a peace offering, smiling lopsidedly when Hannibal looks a question at him. "Abigail already thinks you're the best thing since sliced bread, and the dogs are well on their way to becoming your biggest fans. And, well. I guess you're a *little* interesting," he admits, amused to think how appalled he'd have been just two months ago at the idea of teasing someone like Hannibal. How unlikely he would've thought it to have someone to trade jokes and friendly barbs with at all.

Hannibal chuckles, warm and fond, some of the shadows lifting from around him. "High praise. I'll have to make certain I continue to earn it."

Will shakes his head, meeting Hannibal's eyes for a brief *nightblack, cool breeze, soft insect sounds and warm hands steadying* instant before ducking away again, the back of his neck prickling with something like embarrassment at his own openness. "Don't worry about it. From what I've heard, family means you get a free pass."

Chapter End Notes

Because I apparently forgot to add this last time (probably because I had to search my tumblr for it, UGH), the photo of Jesse? CANON.

https://ciceqi.tumblr.com/post/695028322355281920/context-boon-universe-question-what-in-the-hell

The absolute fuck.

End Notes

Oh yeah--tumblr is here if you want notifications and dumb chapter summaries that way. XD

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!